

NOTES AND REVIEWS

Pierre Guyotat: Sex and Revolution or Alienation and Censorship

Now that the furor caused by the French Government's sudden censorship of Guyotat's novel *Eden, Eden, Eden* in 1970 has subsided, we are in a better position to evaluate his accomplishments to date. Their importance is to be found, it seems to me, in a rather unexpected quarter.

Guyotat published a novella titled "Sur un cheval"¹ in 1961 followed by a full-length novel *Ashby*² in 1964. The former would seem to have been a preparatory study for the latter since they share many of the same characters and somewhat the same literary techniques which are hardly revolutionary or even particularly innovative. The earlier work is composed of generally brief paragraphs each bearing a character's name and consisting of stream of consciousness revelations, a technique Butor had used seven years earlier in his *Passage de Milan* of 1954. Nor is either work significantly revolutionary where sex is concerned. "Sur un cheval" has just enough of an adolescent outlook to render it lyrically realistic while *Ashby* has just enough quirky sex to make its two capricious protagonists, Lord and Lady Ashby, acceptable English eccentrics. Neither work is radically revolutionary where politics is concerned. True, in the novel a page or two is devoted to the grisly racial injustices of the Boer War (A. pp. 47-48) and passing mention is made both of the bombing of Haiphong (A. p. 50) and of French repression in Indochina in general (A. p. 58). Otherwise *Ashby* is a neoromantic, pseudogothic tale abounding in literary allusions to everyone from Shakespeare to Gide and in musical allusions to everyone from Buxtehude to Brahms. In short, a vaguely interesting tale overburdened with its own pretensions, precisely the type of story an educated, sensitive young Frenchman might write about that sceptered isle at the age of twenty-three.

But suddenly in October 1967, Guyotat published a text entitled "Tam-Tam"³ whose subject no one could mistake. With some revisions this scene provided the opening fifteen pages of *Eden, Eden, Eden*.⁴ Guyotat's novel *Tombeau pour cinq cent mille soldats*⁵ was published in December of that same year. *Tombeau . . .* is 492 pages of sex, blood, and violence, with sufficient overtones of revolution to give the story the appearance of a legendary setting somewhat resembling Algeria and the characters the motivation for their actions. Late in 1969 another scene by Guyotat, "Bordels boucherie,"⁶ appeared in *Tel Quel* and provided the second section, this time of thirty pages, of *Eden, Eden, Eden*⁷ which was published in July 1970.

Although *Eden, Eden, Eden* is one continuous copulation, it is no paradise. The sex, blood, and violence of *Tombeau . . .* are there, but the references to revolution have been so reduced and become so blurred they have lost all impact. The novel purports to be one 256-page incomplete sentence. The fact is that the text, interrupted as it is by endless colons, semicolons, diagonals, double diagonals, dashes, and ellipses, is nothing more than a series of lists and simple, compound, and complex sentences. None of the Proustian magic of the long sentence is at work here.

One can only wonder what happened to Guyotat in the three years between *Ashby* of 1964 and *Tombeau . . .* of 1967. His biography⁸ is so classic it would be comic if it were not so tragic. Guyotat was born in 1940 in the small town of Bourg-Argental not far from Lyon, the son of a country doctor. His mother

belonged to the provincial bourgeoisie with some pretensions to the *petite noblesse* and with all its disdain for the *nouveaux riches* and the industrialists. The Guyotat library contained the classics and many authors of the eighteenth century, but jumped from Chateaubriand at the beginning of the nineteenth to the great Russian novelists of the end of that century. Guyotat attended parochial schools organized according to him along the lines of miniature military academies where the students spent a great deal of time translating from Greek and Latin but where the formation of the imagination also had an essential place. This early education could well help explain Guyotat's undeniable talent for the manipulation of language. At the age of eleven he began to draw with a passion. In high school at the age of fourteen he read for the first time an excerpt from Rimbaud's "Bateau ivre" which was for him, as he put it without intending any pun, a true illumination. Shades of Claudel! Guyotat immediately began to write and under the influence of discoveries about the German composer Schumann, he came to the German Romantics and later the English.

Like many of the Romantics Guyotat rebelled against his bourgeois family, school, society, country, and religion, all in the name of liberty. When his mother died in 1958 he fled to Paris, abandoned poetry in favor of prose, discovered the film, American novelists like Faulkner, and, as he wrote of one of his characters in "Sur un cheval," "fit son entrée dans la littérature sur un vélo" (*SC*. p. a22). Between 1960 and 1962 he did his military service, spending twenty months in Algeria. Although "Sur un cheval" had been accepted for publication by this time, Guyotat wanted to place an ocean between his family and himself, to put himself into a situation where he would be faced with official authoritarianism, with, as he expressed it, "a traumatic reality" (*LI*. p. 107). This he certainly found. The physical and psychological misery of the soldier in the boondocks, the class struggle exacerbated by the hierarchical military system, the ostracism he suffered as an intellectual and what was worse, as a non-university intellectual, the permanent promiscuity of male isolation among males, the daily anguish, language reduced to the level of fifteen slang expressions that sufficed for all communication, such was the "traumatic reality" he discovered.

He did manage to write the brief prologue to *Ashby* during this period. Just a few days after the cease-fire he was arrested, however, for aiding and abetting desertion, harm to the morale of the army, and the possession and distribution of forbidden literature. Guyotat discovered for the first time the power of the written word when the military police used his own literary sketches of scenes he had actually witnessed, scattered notes and notations, musical and pictorial as well as literary, which were intended as part of a future novel, as evidence against him. After ten days of interrogation he was condemned to, in one place he says two (*LI*. pp. 2-21) and in another he says three (*LI*. p. 109) months of solitary confinement, a sentence that would seem to exceed military necessity. One almost gets the feeling that this was the injustice Guyotat was consciously or unconsciously seeking, was almost hoping to provoke, in order to provide himself with a reason for total revolt.

After his military service Guyotat worked on *Ashby*, then on *Tombeau* . . . and made a trip to Greece. Antigone's struggle was for him the classical, in all senses of the word, struggle against oppression and familial arbitrariness, "un combat d'homme, furieusement matérialiste" (*LI*. p. 110), as he put it. Upon returning to Paris he read Lély's *Vie du Marquis de Sade* which, like Rimbaud's "Bateau ivre," provoked still another crisis in Guyotat's literary development. Again as he expressed it: "Quand j'ai vu que la vie de Sade avait été entière vécue sous le rapport de l'esprit et dans l'abstrait le plus complet, cela a déterminé chez moi une véritable crise d'abstraction totale" (*LI*. p. 21). Under those conditions Guyotat finished *Tombeau*

The publication of *Tombeau* . . . was followed very shortly by the disastrous month of May 1968, when Guyotat put his foot inside the Sorbonne for the first time and when he joined the Communist Party. The reality of participation in revolution could now be added to the creation of imaginary scenes of revolution in the novel. Although analysts have linked the creative act of writing to the sexual drive, Guyotat is the first author I know who has attempted to explain his political activity in terms of the sexual impulse. His reasoning goes something like this: in speaking of the first of three drafts or stages through which his writings pass, he mentions "Un texte qui est alors lié à la masturbation, écrit pendant l'expérience sexuelle elle-même, dont la rédaction périodique est toujours liée à une pratique immédiate sexuelle—et interdite en tant qu'immédiate, ce point est capital—, interrompue chaque fois par l'orgasme" (*LI*. p. 40). He goes on to explain the connection between this private and personal action and his public and political action: ". . . l'expérience de la lutte quotidienne contre une syntaxe, un vocabulaire, une grammaire idéologiquement désuets et bien déterminés . . . cette lutte m'a finalement confirmé que mon travail s'inscrivait très précisément dans une lutte tout à fait généralisée contre le pouvoir et contre l'idéologie dominante, contre l'idéalisme" (*LI*. p. 51). The progression from the creative act of writing as an analogue of the sexual act, to the political act as an analogue of the act of writing is clear, at least in Guyotat's mind. In any case, he does not hesitate to affirm "ce lien maintenant indissoluble entre le *sexe* et la politique" (*LI*. p. 54).

What makes all of this so dismaying is the fact that Guyotat, like most authors, wants to reach "l'audience la plus large possible, de faire admettre, lire notre texte par le plus grand nombre possible" (*LI*. p. 112). As a fervent Marxist and Communist Guyotat is a great admirer of Fidel Castro and the "joyous" Cuban Revolution (*LI*. pp. 14, 17) just as he is a great admirer of Mao (*LI*. p. 16) and the Cultural Revolution. The final irony is: in which of the many Communist countries would Guyotat have been permitted to publish *Tombeau* . . . , not to speak of *Eden* . . . ? My impression is that it would have been totally impossible. How then does he propose to reach the widest audience possible in whatever country? He himself admits that the sexual aspect that pervades his novels gives him a "mauvaise conscience" because "le sexuel mène encore à la métaphysique" (*LI*. p. 20). He dreams of eventually writing a book that would free itself of this aspect. In view of his demonstrated verbal talents, one can only hope that he will. I am, nevertheless, reminded of what Angus Lord Ashby said of himself in Guyotat's first novel: "Je ne suis pas un violent, je suis un élégiaque—sans contrainte" (*A*. p. 21). It is the "sans contrainte" that worries me where Guyotat's future works are concerned.

In 1972 Guyotat published his self-defense in *Littérature interdite*. There he describes the ideal political man: "Il n'a plus de sentiments. C'est Mao. Sa légende le précède. Il n'est plus que le dépositaire de ce qui survient. Il n'y a plus rien chez lui du romantisme révolutionnaire qui animait le premier chef. Le *Je* du deuxième chef est complètement effacé" (*LI*. p. 16). How "romantic" Malraux's *La Condition humaine* appears to us now that more than forty years have passed. Guyotat's second leader is named Béja and is found in *Tombeau*. . . . There he is pictured as "ni chef, ni second, ni sujet, ni inspiré, mais choisi, provoqué par le destin, produit mathématique du destin historique, parole et non plus bouche, premier homme auquel aucune sorte de dieu ne pouvait convenir, premier homme à ne point prier, premier homme sans coeur, sans raison, sans cruauté, sans mère, corps traversé par la vie, mais ne pouvant la retenir, corps sans limites, forme, chiffre, signal" (*T*. p. 403). Later in the novel Guyotat maintains that "Béja . . . ne veut gouverner que des misérables; la foule, seule, l'intéresse. Il fera détruire toutes les villes . . .

arrachera leurs enfants aux mères, abolira les principes de la famille, de l'affection et de la propriété" (T. p. 463). Such is Guyotat's political ideal. The key words are, perhaps, "forme, chiffre, signal," all total abstractions. One can understand how Guyotat's social alienation might have grown psychologically out of his sexual subjectivity and out of his experiences. That his social alienation should have in turn developed into a political abstraction that is not even human let alone sexual, is more difficult to comprehend.

Given Guyotat's passionate political proclivities one can understand the critical attention he has received from Philippe Sollers and the *Tel Quel* group. Sollers' article "La matière et sa phrase"⁹ is a brilliant analysis of the linguistic structure of Guyotat's style with innumerable acute associations and observations. And yet, Sollers treats sentences as if they were matter, words as if they were particles of matter with no meaning. Or perhaps better, all meaning is on the same level, thus meaningless, thus an abstraction. The sentence has the form of matter but since all matter is undifferentiated, form is a meaningless abstraction. Words can be multiplied and divided, added and subtracted like so many numbers signifying nothing. "Forme, chiffre, signal" have no sexual potential and with its disappearance Guyotat's sexual, literary, and thus political drive all disappear in a formless, numberless, merely symbolic cloud of excessive and redundant verbiage. As the Marxist critic Joseph Venturini wrote, "Tout dénoncer en bloc équivaut à ne rien dénoncer."¹⁰ Thus Guyotat ends up with neither sex nor revolution, only alienation and censorship.

One conclusion might be that in Guyotat's case the question is not that of Freud or Marx nor that of Freud and Marx, but that of neither Freud nor Marx. Freud might explain the sexual revolt and Marx might explain the political revolt. Freud might explain the sexual alienation and Marx might explain the political censorship. Taken together, Freud and Marx could never explain how the politics of revolt pale within the context of so much sexual violence. Nor can they explain how endless sexual enormities make for dull reading. Neither the sex nor the politics of Guyotat's works is very interesting yet his case alerts us to the fact of literary censorship, arbitrary limits arbitrarily imposed on personal freedom.

The possibility exists that the difference in what Guyotat produces five years after *Eden, Eden, Eden* may well be as different from it as it was from *Ashby*. Whatever he publishes in the future, the irony is that censorship provoked the autobiographical portions of *Littérature interdite* which are an invaluable source of information about the generation of Frenchmen who are now in their early thirties. Born too late to have any very clear memory of World War II, raised in a provincial bourgeois family, Guyotat personifies the young radical who stormed the Sorbonne in 1968 and brought France perilously close to collapse. In spite of its biases and lapses in logic, or perhaps precisely because of them, Guyotat's autobiography reveals a great deal to us about his generation, a group of intellectual, well educated, talented, creative radicals who will, in the near future, be a part of the generation in power.

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NOTES

¹Donalbain (pseud), "Sur un cheval," in *Ecrire 10*, ed. Jean Cayrol (Paris: Seuil, 1961), pp. a1-a-47. Subsequent quotations are from this source and bear the page reference in parentheses after the abbreviated title SC.

²Pierre Guyotat, *Ashby* (Paris: Seuil, 1964). Subsequent quotations are from this edition and bear the page reference in parentheses after the abbreviated title A.

³Pierre Guyotat, "Tam-Tam," *Les Cahiers du Chemin*, No. 1 (15 Oct. 1967), pp. 7-19.

⁴Pierre Guyotat, *Eden, Eden, Eden* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), pp. 15-30.

⁵Pierre Guyotat, *Tombeau pour cinq cent mille soldats* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967). Subsequent quotations are from this edition and bear the page reference in parentheses after the abbreviated title *T*.

⁶Pierre Guyotat, "Bordels boucherie," *Tel Quel*, No. 36 (Winter 1969), pp. 18-32.

⁷Pierre Guyotat, *Eden, Eden, Eden*, pp. 30-60.

⁸Pierre Guyotat, *Littérature interdite* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972). Subsequent quotations are from this edition and bear the page reference in parentheses after the abbreviated title *LI*.

⁹Philippe Sollers, "La matière et sa phrase," *Critique*, No. 290 (July 1971), pp. 607-625.

¹⁰Joseph Venturini, "La NC en direct... à propos de Pierre Guyotat," quoted by Guyotat, *Littérature interdite*, pp. 182-183.

Socialist Realism in a Cuban Novel: *La Situación* by Lisandro Otero

The victory of Communism in Cuba had an immediate effect upon the orientation of a good part of the Cuban narrative during the first half of the sixties. The social and political reality in existence prior to the Revolutionary triumph became a major topic of critical analysis in the novels and short stories published at that time. Socialist realism did not become the only official doctrine in Cuba, as it had during the Stalinist era in Russia, yet it did appear in novels such as Lisandro Otero's *La Situación* (1963) under a different and more complex guise. Turning away from traditional patterns, Otero allows a Marxist outlook to emerge while presenting events and characters in an objective and realistic manner. *La Situación*, probably the most ambitious attempt to unveil the very roots of power in prerevolutionary Cuba, is an indictment of the bourgeoisie, the social class in which Otero himself was raised. Yet Otero's manner of achieving his goal is unique for he departs from the narrow molds of typical socialist realistic works in order to extol the virtues of the Communist system. He avoids the highly rhetorical denunciation characteristic of those works and does not set the time of the novel in the socialist present. His main character is not the positive hero of most socialist realistic novels, but Luis Dascal, a disoriented and disgruntled lower middle-class youth who restlessly moves about within the social circles of the rich bourgeoisie of Havana. Otero's deviation from the usual standards does not weaken his intent. Through an intelligent manipulation of the narrative and his complex character portrayals, Otero emerges as faithful to the spirit of socialist realism as the most orthodox representatives of that art.

The novel begins on August 26, 1951 in a bar in Varadero where the upper class meets and mingles during the beach season. Through his friend Carlos Sarría, Luis has become acquainted with certain representatives of the economically dominant element, among them, Alejandro Sarría, Carlos' father, a bank tycoon, and Senator Cedrón, an influential politician. The time span of the narrative plot is significant. The first scene reveals that Luis and Cristina, Carlos' mother, will soon begin their affair. The novel ends shortly after their relationship is concluded sometime in May of 1952. This time period of about