

# André Pieyre de Mandiargues and the Discovery of the Self

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André Pieyre de Mandiargues has always been especially interested in art which explores the inner recesses of the self. He particularly admires Surrealism, which was born at a time when "les artistes ont peu à peu cessé de regarder hors d'eux-mêmes (vers le monde extérieur) pour ne plus s'intéresser qu'à ce que leur propose une certaine nécessité ou fantaisie intérieure" (*Troisième Belvédère*, p. 8).<sup>1</sup> He claims that Max Ernst, one of his favorite painters, used a method which "ressemblait à celle du psychiatre explorant une conscience désorganisée" (*Troisième Belvédère*, p. 26), and he says of painting in general: "Or, le peintre est un oeil (dirigé vers l'intérieur aussi souvent que vers l'extérieur)" (*Bona l'amour et la peinture*, p. 17). Rousseau, the master of introspection, is praised by him because: "Son inquiétude et le regard extrêmement aigu qu'il porte sur soi, son examen de l'homme érotique à l'intérieur de lui-même, sa curiosité pour les premiers troubles de l'âme enfantine, n'ont pas vieilli depuis bientôt deux siècles."<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, Mandiargues believes his own works are largely an exploration of the self, and he has said: "Me faire miroir, c'est là mon premier acte de conteur ou de romancier" (*Troisième Belvédère*, p. 357).

Mandiargues's fiction frequently takes the form of a journey of discovery. Rébecca Nul riding towards her lover on her motorcycle in *La Motocyclette*, and Sigismund visiting Barcelona in *La Marge*, travel across bridges and national boundaries which are also frontiers of the inner self. Vanina in *Le Lis de Mer* and Ferréol Buq in *Marbre* undertake travels during which they learn many things about themselves. Captain Idalium in "L'Opéra des Falaises" (*Soleil des loups*, pp. 171-208) follows a woman who leads him to a cave where the whole of his past is acted out in front of him.

These characters, as they discover their selves, often see its darker side, those ugly urges which Malraux has called man's "demons."<sup>3</sup> Mandiargues agrees with the painter Chirico that the artist must "découvrir et tirer de ses mystérieuses coulisses, pour le jeter sur la scène du tableau, le démon qui se cache au fond de tout être et de toute chose" (*Troisième Belvédère*, p. 72). In his own work, this side of human nature is represented by the erotic content, which

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<sup>1</sup>I have quoted from the following editions of works by Mandiargues, and page references are placed after quotations. (The place of publication is Paris, unless otherwise stated): *Soleil des loups* (Laffont, 1951); *Marbre* (Laffont, 1953); *Le Belvédère* (Grasset, 1958); *Feu de braise* (Grasset, 1959); *Deuxième Belvédère* (Grasset, 1962); *Porte dévergondée* (Gallimard, 1965); *La Marge* (Gallimard, 1967); *Bona l'amour et la peinture* (Geneva: Skira, 1971); *Mascarets* (Gallimard, 1971); *Troisième Belvédère* (Gallimard, 1971); *Le Lis de mer* (Folio, 1972); *Le Cadran lunaire* (Gallimard, 1972); *La Motocyclette* (Folio, 1973); *Isabella Morra* (Gallimard, 1973); *Le Musée noir* (Folio, 1974); *Le Désordre de la mémoire* (Gallimard, 1975); *Sous la lame* (Gallimard, 1976).

<sup>2</sup>Mandiargues's reply to "Notre enquête sur Jean-Jacques Rousseau," *Le Thyrsé*, 54, No. 2 (1 Feb. 1961), 98.

<sup>3</sup>André Malraux, *Saturne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), p. 110; and "L'Homme et le fantôme," *L'Express*, 21 May 1955, p. 15.

frequently has a dark, cruel aspect. One thinks of the paintings of torture and suffering inside the hollow statue found by Ferréol Buq; of Rébecca Nul tied and beaten with roses whose thorns lacerate her flesh; of the rape of Marceline Caïn in "Le Sang de l'agneau" (*Le Musée noir*, pp. 16-18); of the torture and death of Isabella Morra at the hands of her brothers. These are but a few examples of the cruel eroticism of a writer who has expressed his admiration for Sade,<sup>4</sup> has praised *Histoire d'O* and *Le C— d'Irène*,<sup>5</sup> and who admits: "En réalité, je me prends pour un sadomasochiste" (*Le Désordre de la mémoire*, p. 249).

Without introducing fanciful Freudian interpretations, it is possible to recognize many symbols of sado-erotic urges in Mandiargues's fiction. The Columbus Monument and the bottle of liqueur shaped like it which figure in *La Marge* are obvious phallic symbols.<sup>6</sup> Rébecca Nul's motorcycle is another such symbol, and is called "noir démon" by her (*La Motocyclette*, p. 202). Hair, a universal sexual fetish, plays an important rôle in "Le Tombeau d'Aubrey Beardsley" (*Le Musée noir*, pp. 177-245), where the characters are served a "dîner capillaire," use hair as serviettes, and are entertained by dancers wearing only wigs. It is clear from this story that eating too is linked to erotic pleasure, for the narrator, watching the women eat, comments: "Pareils spectacles me jettent dans un état plus proche de la volupté que vous ne sauriez croire" (*Le Musée noir*, p. 222). Maria Mors in "L'Etudiante" (*Soleil des loups*, pp. 133-70) takes off her shoes and displays an obvious sexual pleasure when eating certain foods, and in one essay Mandiargues explicitly links sea food to prostitution.<sup>7</sup>

But it is above all the many animals in Mandiargues's stories which symbolize sexual instincts. Vanina sees a pig and a bull while on the way to meet her lover, and in "L'Archéologue" (*Soleil des loups*, pp. 7-94) a huge stone pig's head presides over the sexual activities of the skaters on a frozen lake. Marceline Caïn in "Le Sang de l'agneau" rides almost naked on the sheep in the hut where she is raped, and is so overcome by their odor that she feels she is becoming an animal herself. The heroine of "Rodogune" (*Feu de braise*, pp. 7-51) is said to have sexual relations with her pet ram, and in "Odiva" (*Mascarets*, pp. 173-88) a woman does have such relations with a dog.

The sex act, in Freudian analysis, is often represented as an attempt to return to the womb, and this is also how Mandiargues portrays it. The man in "L'Homme du Parc Monceau" (*Le Musée noir*, pp. 119-42) enters the Etruscan Tomb in the Parc Monceau, and is there engulfed by "le Chat Mammon" (pronounced much the same as "maman"). He is, at that moment, absorbed by "le sein d'une mer de fourrure" (p. 142. "Mer" is, of course, pronounced the same way as "mère"). The incestuous connotations of the sexual urge are also clear in *Isabella Morra*, where the heroine's brothers are obviously impelled by an erotic frenzy when they torture and kill her. Jean de Juni in "L'Enfantillage" (*Feu de braise*, pp. 187-213), as he has intercourse with a prostitute, remembers an old servant who was almost a mother to him. Curiously, she also had a rather leonine aspect which made her a father figure too, and Jean de Juni mutters "Père soleil" (p. 211) as her features combine in his mind with a brass ball

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<sup>4</sup>"Juliette," *Troisième Belvédère*, pp. 325-37.

<sup>5</sup>"Les fers, le feu, la nuit de l'âme," *Le Belvédère*, pp. 81-90; "Irène," *Troisième Belvédère*, pp. 346-50; "Encore Irène," *Troisième Belvédère*, pp. 351-53.

<sup>6</sup>Mandiargues has referred to this monument as "le monument le plus caractéristiquement et le plus colossalement phallique qui ait été dressé dans le monde" (*Le Désordre de la mémoire*, p. 196).

<sup>7</sup>"Les Oursins," *Le Cadran lunaire*, pp. 116-22.

ornamenting the bed. In "Le Diamant" (*Feu de braise*, pp. 143-86), the paternal symbol of the sun reappears. Sarah Mose falls into a diamond, where she couples with a naked man resembling a lion, who appears when the sun strikes the diamond. While this happens, she can see the features of her father looming above her as he peers at the diamond.

Many of these aspects of the sexual urge can be seen as unsavory, or even unacceptable. Mandiargues indicates, however, that they must be confronted if we are to know ourselves. They are represented in his fiction by areas of decay and stagnation which his characters have to cross before they discover themselves. Vanina crosses a stretch of sewage and decaying vegetation as she goes to meet her lover, and Marceline Caïn, before the rape which releases her hidden self, visits a nearby city where she notices an "odeur de fièvre et de pourri" (*Le Musée noir*, p. 28). When Conrad Mur in "L'Archéologue" descends to the sea bed in the first stage of a journey into himself, he walks through the remains of dead and rotting fish. Captain Idalium discovers his real self after a journey across a seashore strewn with rusting metal, rotting sponges and decaying fish.

Sometimes the inner urges are depicted as more than unsavory—they are violent and dangerous. In "Le Tombeau d'Aubrey Beardsley," the black demons inside man are represented by the negro actor Gabalus, who, during a performance of Othello (which describes the demons of violence and jealousy), sets free all the lusts of the women in the audience. In the same story, Mandiargues writes of a party given by a group of giant women and attended by dwarf men—indicating that men are puny beside the sexual drives represented by the giant women. The narrator is shown some curtains depicting scenes of torture and cruelty. Although excited by this, and strongly attracted by one of the women, he hesitates to take any liberties with her, knowing she is much stronger than he. The other men are not so careful, and arouse the anger of the women, who easily defeat them in the ensuing battle.

The rape of Marceline Caïn in "Le Sang de l'agneau" also releases her violent urges, which cause her to go home and kill her parents, having already allowed her rapist to hang himself. Captain Idalium's unrestrained cruelty destroys him when he follows a beautiful woman to a cave, where various animals enact scenes depicting the horrors he has committed, then kill him. Hester Algernon in "La Vision capitale" (*Soleil des loups*, pp. 209-58) is mentally deranged by her demons. She symbolically nourishes her instinctual and violent side by keeping dogs which, by careful breeding, she tries to turn back into wolves. (In other words, she wants her domesticated and socially acceptable impulses to revert to their natural state.) When invited to a fancy dress ball, she openly assumes animal form by dressing as a rooster. She arrives at the château where the ball is to be given several days too early, and the keeper of the place, who is also the guardian of her inner self, allows her to enter with great reluctance. Inside she finds paintings of cruelty and savage combat. That night, she is wakened by a naked madman, who enters her room carrying a severed head. This scene finally deranges her for the rest of her life.

Society has always tried to control such dangerous urges, and these controls are represented in *La Motoeyclette* by the customs officials, the police whom Rébecca scrupulously avoids, and by speed limits and similar restrictions. Vanina too is careful to avoid the police as she goes to meet her lover. In "Mil neuf cent trente-trois" (*Sous la lame*, pp. 9-76), Foligno, troubled by violent impulses, feels uneasy when he encounters some policemen, who are, in this case, guarding a prison, another symbol of restraints imposed by society.

Mandiargues himself, while accepting that these demons are dangerous, believes we should realize they are an essential part of us, and he quotes Baudelaire's comment that there exists a "Lucifer latent qui est installé au coeur humain" (*Troisième Belvédère*, p. 189). Elsewhere, he recognizes that he too shares this darker side of human nature: "J'ai pensé quelquefois avoir une moitié de visage en enfer et l'autre dans je ne sais quel ciel."<sup>8</sup> The duality of good and evil in man can be seen in "Mil neuf cent trente-trois," where Abel Foligno is suddenly seized by a desire to smash in the face of his sleeping wife. Horrified, he flees to Ferrara, a city which reflects the contradictions of his own nature, "ville ambiguë entre toutes, berceau de Savonarole et tombeau de Lucrece Borgia, asile de la folie du Tasse, séjour préféré de Carlo Gesualdo, prince de Vanosa, illustre assassin et musicien sublime" (p. 39). Here he enters a brothel, where a prostitute wearing an artificial phallus conveys the ambiguity of human nature by her hermaphrodite disguise. He refuses her services, but later comes to terms with his dual nature, returns to the brothel and thus accepts his darker side.

Conrad Mur in "L'Archéologie," on the other hand, is so repelled by this side of human nature that the girl he chooses as his fiancée seems to have no sexual warmth: she is cold, calm, statuesque, and slightly masculine. But, even as he skates with her on the frozen lake, he is aware of his demons, symbolized by the alarming creatures he imagines lurking under the ice. While on holiday in Italy, he goes with his fiancée to see a certain abbé Mercurio, who shows them a strongly troubling wax figure of a girl, her stomach cut open, and a flood of strawberries spilling out. His fiancée now falls ill. She ceases to be a cold, idealized figure, and becomes stark, suffering flesh which repels him. "Le ciel du Sud, en quelque sorte, l'avait rendue femme," he comments (p. 63), and abandons her. Then, as in a dream, he is transported to the sea bed, where he discovers a gigantic statue which he identifies as "la grande Vénus mérétrice" (p. 20). Now, Mandiargues points out elsewhere that "Vénus était dans la mythologie des anciens peuples de la Méditerranée le symbole de la dualité, de l'ambiguïté essentielle de l'univers" (*Deuxième Belvédère*, p. 209). It is no surprise when this goddess punishes Conrad Mur for rejecting the duality of human nature by causing his death.

These examples should suffice to indicate how important the theme of self-discovery is in Mandiargues's work. One might sum up this aspect of it by mentioning some of the many instances in it of people seeing themselves from the outside. The narrator of "Le Triangle ambigu" (*Mascarets*, pp. 75-92) discovers himself in the act of sex by having a mirror over his bed, and Barbara Bara in "Armoire de lune" (*Mascarets*, pp. 93-108) makes love on a tomb made like a wardrobe with a mirror. The customs official in "Miranda" (*Sous la lame*, pp. 97-112) sees himself reflected in Miranda's eyes as he embraces her, then she turns into his double, and he is embracing himself. Captain Idalium sees his own life of cruelty acted out before him. Maria Mors in "L'Etudiante" looks through the window of her room and regularly sees herself in the window of a nearby building acting out events which later come true. Mandiargues says: "Marie n'y trouve rien qu'elle ne connaisse déjà, car c'est sa propre image qu'elle découvre" (*Soleil des loups*, p. 163). The same might be said of most of his characters, and Maria Mors, contemplating the theater of her own dreams and inmost self is a perfect representative of his fiction, which is, in one of its most important aspects, an attempt to discover the self.

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<sup>8</sup>Alain Jouffroy, "Mandiargues, celui qui a fait peur aux jurys," *L'Express*, 6 Dec. 1963, p. 44.