

A Note on Hervé Basin's *Un Feu dévore un autre feu*

Hervé Basin is one of the most prolific and consistent of modern French novelists. Since the *succès de scandale* of *Vipère au poing* (1948), which dealt with a boy's rebellion against an unnaturally cruel mother, he has published ten more novels, many short stories, and several collections of poems. Now in his late sixties and the *doyen* of the *Académie Goncourt*, Bazin continues to prove that his creative powers remain undimmed. His twelfth novel, *Un Feu dévore un autre feu* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1978), is eloquent testimony to his variegated talent and the freshness of his imagination.

The novel concerns a right-wing coup d'état in an unidentified Latin-American country—in fact a conflation of that continent's many nations in which political violence and extremism are endemic—which forms the backdrop to a love affair between a left-wing senator, Manuel, on the run from the vengeful new authorities, and Maria, a girl from a traditionalist family who represents female emancipation Latin-American style. Maria's continuing piety is in no sense an obstacle to her determination to be free to love, even when the object of her love stands for political attitudes with which she is not much in sympathy. Together they find sanctuary in the attic of the house of a French diplomat and his Swedish wife, Olivier and Selma, and it is there that their love at last assumes a physical expression. Although their first meetings are recounted in flashback, the core of the novel examines the development of their passion in the face of an alien and murderous world that ultimately kills them.

The novel's title is derived from Benvolio's line in *Romeo and Juliet*: "Tut, man, one fire burns out another's burning." Bazin, without pressing the analogy too closely, uses elements of the play to flesh out the imaginative structure of his novel. Thus there are lovers from different, indeed hostile, environments caught in the cross fire between warring factions; there is the theme of love as a transcendental force; and above all the image of imprisonment—the attic of the novel parallels the mausoleum in the play—is deployed as a means for the lovers to arrive at self-awareness. It is worth noting, in passing, that imprisonment possesses an important thematic resonance in modern, i.e. post-medieval, literature and constitutes a thread running from Shakespeare, through Racine—in *Andromaque*, *Briannicus* and *Phèdre*, for example, at least one major character is a prisoner—to Diderot (*La Religieuse*), Stendhal (*Le Rouge et le noir*), Wilde (*The Ballad of Reading Gaol*), Kafka (*Der Prozeß*), Koestler (*Darkness at Noon*), Camus (*L'Étranger*) and John Fowles (*The Collector*). It is a tribute to Bazin that his use of the theme may be mentioned in the context of such exalted literary company.

One of the predominant themes of Bazin's fiction is that of exile. Jean Rezeau, the central character of Bazin's trilogy—*Vipère au poing* (1948), *La Mort du petit cheval* (1950), *Cri de la chouette* (1972)—remarks towards the end of the last novel: "Le lieu où nous avons ouvert les yeux sur le monde, il est irremplaçable." Since most of Bazin's characters are temporarily or permanently separated from their birthplace, they retain a nostalgia for a pristine paradise of childhood that has become unattainable, a nostalgia that persists even when, as in Jean Rezeau's case, the childhood was largely an unhappy one. In *Un Feu dévore un autre feu* the theme of exile remains important but is treated in a somewhat different manner. Manuel, as an outlaw, is an exile in his own land through being on the wrong political side. Maria, because of her association with him, chooses to share the same exile. Paradoxically, physical exile from their native land would signify personal freedom. Olivier and Selma too, because of their

diplomatic status, are by definition exiles. Their willingness to help Manuel and Maria at considerable risk to themselves affirms their identification with suffering humanity; refusal on their part to come to the lovers' aid would have exiled them, in a much deeper sense, from human beings in danger of their lives.

Another theme much treated in Bazin's fiction is the wayward, unlikely but imperative nature of love, which need not necessarily be either sexual love or between a man and a woman, as is shown, for example, in *Lève-toi et marche* (1952) and *Au nom du fils* (1960). Love is envisaged by Bazin as the one human emotion capable of dispersing the sense of alienation, of mitigating the effects of exile. It also involves—and in this sense Bazin's novels are political, though non-partisan, statements—a passionate affirmation of individual freedom, freedom from constraint and convention, from the chains of family, society and belief, a motif studied with the most powerful effect in *La Mort du petit cheval* and *Qui j'ose aimer* (1956). In *Un Feu dévore un autre feu* the love of Manuel and Maria transcends upbringing, family, and ideology and even, given the political circumstances of the novel, common sense, but it confers existential meaning upon their lives and vindicates their last days together.

Un Feu dévore un autre feu belongs to the form of the short novel to which the French genius has made major contributions (e.g. *Manon Lescaut*, *Adolphe*, *La Symphonie pastorale*). The writing is spare and concentrated in a manner not always characteristic of Bazin's earlier work. The novel excludes all superfluous detail and yet gives the impression of density of texture, so that the reader is left with a sense of a controlled and structured form created as a framework for the delineation of strong, passionate, and believable characters. The tightness of the writing, the deftly-drawn background, only too typical of the twentieth century, the subtle interplay of personal and political themes make of this novel a worthy addition to an already substantial achievement.

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Mathematics in the *Ficciones* of Jorge Luis Borges

This paper is a comment on the rather explicit use of mathematical concepts in three of Borges's *Ficciones*: "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," "An Examination of the Work of Herbert Quain," and "The Library of Babel."

The mathematics in "Tlön" is at first only subtly suggested. The first mention of it is in connection with the recollection of one Herbert Ashe who has "a mathematics textbook in his hand."¹ Ashe and the narrator discuss the duodecimal system (in which twelve is written 10), and Ashe states that he is transcribing some duodecimal tables into sexagesimals (in which sixty is written 10). Nothing

¹Jorge Luis Borges, *Ficciones* (New York: Grove Press, 1962), p. 20.