

## NOTES AND SHORT ESSAYS

### Madness, Mayhem, and Murder in Ribemont-Dessaignes's *Céleste Ugolin*

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In *Céleste Ugolin*,<sup>1</sup> Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes studies the case of a madman or at least a person who suddenly and several times commits violent crimes. The narration is in the first-person singular, the opening scene one of seduction of the maid. Already on page five, the hero claims the maid is wrong to call him mad, since there are far fewer madmen than supposed. The first strange episode occurs in the rest home or sanatorium where Céleste's wife Stella is forced by the patients to keep playing the piano until she drops from fatigue (p. 26). Her hands seem bloodless as they run along the keys, while her listeners cluck and jostle each other. They seem bestial, and one couple drools on the face of the unwilling pianist who has fainted away. However, Céleste is no better, for he deliberately closes the keyboard on Stella's cracking fingers (p. 27).

In chapter three the reader again finds madness the theme as Faust and the Devil are evoked (p. 31). The scene is a café called "Le Sein d'or" full of male and female prostitutes, "some living on their dreams, others on their bodies" (p. 33). A poet there, André Vésuve, assumed to be a parody of Breton, has a mistress, a young, blind prostitute, Violette. Vésuve is also involved with fat Sésame, a bestial female (p. 39). In one of the scenes of violence involving prostitutes and their pimps, a blind beauty is tortured by a fat slob. Violette and Ugolin become lovers but one day Céleste turns up, "dripping with blood" (p. 57). With Violette Charles lying dead in the car, Ugolin names himself Iggleton, a real portrait painter in England. Again sanity is in question. There is a satiric reference to famous Surrealists as the Judge summons "Picasse, Picape, et Raphaël" (p. 69). Ugolin tells a Dr. Kohn he is not insane (p. 81); he has imaginary stomach pains which are diagnosed as appendicitis, and he later escapes (p. 91). He keeps taking his own pulse and counting heartbeats (p. 92). However, he especially wonders about his mental health and falls into a deep depression (p. 93).

In a hospital again, "M. Iggleton" interests a nurse. Paradoxically he is not believed when he tells the truth, that he is a murderer, not a madman (pp. 98-99). This multi-faceted hero has the additional names of Harold Ray and Milners. The British newspaper clipping, recounting his marriage to Kathleen Gertie Jarvis and his absconding with her fortune, tantalizes the reader. Is this portion imaginary? It appears in the guise of Ugolin's letter to André Vésuve (pp. 108-10). A second contains *récits de rêves*, one of surrealism's key features; for example, Kathleen the

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<sup>1</sup> Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, *Céleste Ugolin* (Paris: Aux Editions du Sagittaire, Simon Kra, 1926). All references to this novel will be documented parenthetically in the text; my translation.

defrauded is hiding her face in her hands (pp. 113-14). Immediately following is a strange text about a lot of worms and eggs (pp. 114-17). Milky, troubled water receives eggs, although no male is around. Everything coming out of the water soon after is coated with worms (p. 117). There is a trip to Spain where, in a café above the river, dancing is taking place to music, castanets, an accordion, and a guitar. The hero-narrator wonders how he can escape from both “the dance and this fishbowl of love” (p. 118).

Chapter nine begins very curiously with André Vésuve telling Céleste of a “monster capable of curing the obstacle of love” (p. 119). There is a very grotesque creature, retarded and neglected, kept locked up by her mother who exploits her, charging admission for people to gape at this unfortunate girl in stinking rags (pp. 119-21). This pitiful young woman bears the unlikeliest of names: Égérie, a “female adviser,” a name redolent of past glories. While Ugolin surveys her with a mixture of fascination and repulsion, she gazes at him with perfect love. All of chapter nine reeks of bestiality, yet Égérie is called a goddess, no doubt an example of Vésuve-Breton’s irony.

For Céleste, Égérie is the receptacle of hate and horror (p. 133). She does not fill Céleste’s life, so he places an ad in the personal column of a newspaper. One interesting response is from Anna Zenana, a bourgeoisie of forty, while the other respondent is Espérance Pommier, a virginal former nun of fifty (pp. 135-39). He chooses Anna (p. 139), with whom he spends nights in Nanterre. By day, Céleste Ugolin meets Égérie on a beach near a pool of the Champs-Élysées (p. 140). Pebbles thrown into the water symbolically engulf “clouds, trees, passersby, the past, the future, pleasure, pain, nothingness, life. It was a night’s ransom” (p. 141).

In the affair with Anna, she seems to be the dominant sexual partner, initiating intercourse (pp. 141-42). In fact, Ugolin feels strangely alone during this love-making (p. 142). To this feeling of emptiness will be added the loss of Égérie. A lugubrious note is sounded when her cold, dead ear is preserved and caressed in Ugolin’s pocket (p. 158). In lighter vein anonymous letters in the same handwriting reach Vésuve and Espérance (p. 172).

Amidst all the eroticism of this novel, there is a public meeting at which Ugolin speaks for women’s rights (pp. 197-98). Likewise he speaks out on Jaurès’s assassination, claiming to wish to “assassinate the freedom to oppress and to be oppressed” (p. 201). However, the erotic side of Ugolin’s nature keeps returning to haunt him: Anna, who loves Céleste, tries to lock him up and is murdered in the most explicitly brutal scene. What happens is that Ugolin tears her lips, spitting out the pieces, twists her arms, cracks her bones, tears off her nose and ears (pp. 213-14). Once caught up in murder, Ugolin kills the leader of the Romanian government, confessing he is neither mad nor an anarchist. The act resembles an *acte gratuit* (p. 217).

Was Céleste’s life a dream, a nightmare, a political statement for the left? In the novel, “The most commonly voiced opinion is that they are confronting a man partially mad” (p. 220). However, the judiciary decides that he is guilty, not only of crimes, but of premeditation, e.g. the marriage swindle in England and the matrimonial want ads. Also, the bigamist’s wife Stella turns up and behaves generously towards him. By refusing to see her, he loses public sympathy: rather than a kind of criminal hero, he is seen as an ordinary person mentally ill (p. 220). Condemned to death, Ugolin initially finds the uncertainty of date, despite the ineluctability of execution, “marvellous” (p. 227). In point of fact, Ugolin behaves in completely the reverse fashion on his execution day. When the time comes, his legs cave in; others must dress him lying down; he must be carried to the scaffold (pp. 229-31). The sudden reversal of his calm causes surprise. One journalist opines

that Ugolin perhaps has had "too beautiful a dream. That suffices to deprive you of consolation at the definitive moment of decapitation" (p. 231). There is no answer to that conjecture, only the nothingness that typifies Ribemont-Dessaignes's philosophical fiction.<sup>2</sup> For one critic, Ribemont-Dessaignes's main theme is "the uselessness of everything." Degradation and a concentration-camp universe encircle us. Jacques Lepage asks whether all acts are "a farce that one plays out in order to escape from the vacuity of existence." He finds this question in all R-D's novels. "Even in *Céleste Ugolin*, in which after the Dadaists' break with Breton he caricatures and vilifies the surrealists, the same question imposes itself."<sup>3</sup>

For another critic: "*Céleste Ugolin*, which appears in 1926, can be considered Ribemont-Dessaignes's first great novel, the one in which he abandons himself completely to surrealist inspiration, in which he puts on stage ... some of his surrealist friends. Of an exceptional virulence, this novel resembles no other, obeys no law of genre, has nothing which permits linking it to the surrealist works of the period. . . . Strange and profuse, an unsuspected vitality traverses the narrative from one end to the other, but it is by the cruelty of the episodes, by the brutal coloration of his style, sometimes also by the burlesque quality and black humor of certain pages, that *Céleste Ugolin* will remain a kind of archetype."<sup>4</sup>

## Ladies' Voices in Donald Barthelme's *The Dead Father* and Gertrude Stein's Dialogues

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Barthelme's *The Dead Father* (1975) contains four dialogues between Julie and Emma which are completely different from the rest of the book.<sup>1</sup> These dialogues strikingly recall some of Stein's compositions, particularly "Every Afternoon: A Dialogue" and "Ladies' Voices (Curtain Raiser)," printed in her *Geography and Plays* (1922). I will also point out a few reminders in the Julie-Emma talks of Stein's *Tender Buttons* (1911).

The two authors share several techniques: failure to keep track of individual speakers, non-sequiturs, clichés, some very concrete and unexpected combinations of words to contrast with the clichés, lines which seem to refer self-consciously to the method of composition, lines which refer to language in general, and sexual innuendos. As a result of the juxtaposition of general and familiar banalities against

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<sup>2</sup> Some other such novels by Ribemont-Dessaignes are *Frontières humaines* (Paris: Ed. du Carrefour, 1929); *Adolescence (Le Vestiaire de la personnalité)* (Paris: Emile Paul, 1930); *Monsieur Jean ou l'Amour absolu* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1934).

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Lepage, "Présence et absence de G.R-D," *Marginales*, 152 (April 1973), 28-37; my translation from p. 33.

<sup>4</sup> Albert Ayguesparse, "Hommage à G. R-D," *Marginales*, 152 (April 1973), 4; my translation.

<sup>1</sup> Donald Barthelme, *The Dead Father* (New York: Pocket Books, 1975), pp. 32-37, 78-82, 111-16, and 181-91. Page numbers for quotations from this edition will appear in parentheses.