

## Hervé Bazin's *L'Eglise verte*

Michael Cardy, Brock University

Hervé Bazin's *L'Eglise verte*<sup>1</sup> might appear at first sight to be an aberrant contribution to a form that Bazin has distinguished since the publication of his first novel, *Vipère au poing*, in 1948. *L'Eglise verte* recounts the story of a retired elementary school principal, Jean-Luc Godion, a widower, and his divorced daughter, Claire, who, during one of their frequent rambles in the forest near their home, glimpse to their astonishment a naked young man playing a flute on an island in the middle of a swamp. Shortly afterwards, the young man is shot and seriously injured in a hunting accident. Taken to hospital, he adamantly refuses to identify himself and, at the initiative of the Godions, he is discharged and finds sanctuary with them for the duration of his convalescence. Though living in a shed on their property and eating at their table, he still insists on anonymity. Claire falls in love with the young man, known for convenience as Monsieur Trente after the number of his hospital bed, and begins an affair with him. At the end of the novel, the young man's identity is revealed following an investigation by an inspector from the Missing Persons Bureau and Godion intervenes in a crucial manner to prevent his daughter from departing with the stranger and sharing with him the anonymous existence he had chosen outside society's net.

A good deal of the novel illustrates the consternation caused by the firm assertion of anonymity in a world where legal forms of identity underpin all societal structures. Monsieur Trente had deliberately turned his back upon society and its sustaining assumptions in order to live in a tent in the forest and Bazin shows that a modern technological society is ill-equipped to cope with his kind of refusal. The background of the novel is rural, and Godion and Claire, both committed ecologists, are passionately interested in the particularity of the natural world around them. A knowledge of botany will assist the reader to appreciate the novel. The irony of a nameless person in an environment full of names will be immediately apparent. Monsieur Trente's refusal of a name constitutes a denial of what is uniquely human and characterizes the species more than anything else: language. As Bazin expresses it: "Le langage, bien plus que le vêtement, a réhabillé le signe" (63).

The green church of the title refers to the forest and appears to be a conscious gloss on the famous image developed by Chateaubriand in *Le Génie du christianisme* when introducing his discussion of Gothic cathedrals with the words: "Les forêts ont été les premiers temples de la Divinité."<sup>2</sup> There are, in fact, medieval resonances in the novel. An important chapter is devoted to a carnival parade which, through its inclusion of masked allegorical figures, derives quite clearly from the Middle Ages. Anyone with even a passing knowledge of medieval romance--and *Perceforest*, significantly, is mentioned in the text (71)--will be aware that the most prominent topographical feature of the literature of Northern Europe in the Middle Ages was the forest. Moreover, "progress" in the medieval period may be defined to a large degree in terms of forest clearance. Monsieur Trente's constant urge to walk in the forest at the end of his convalescence may thus be interpreted as the desire of a non-conformist to return to his sylvan roots in the hope of

---

<sup>1</sup> Hervé Bazin, *L'Eglise verte* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1981).

<sup>2</sup> Chateaubriand, *Le Génie du christianisme* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966) 1: 400-01.

finding true identity and renewed purity away from the corruption of modern society. There exist obvious echoes of Rousseau in the novel and of his quarrel with Diderot, who asserted the origins of all morality in human sociability. In this context, one is reminded of the celebrated passage of Diderot's *La Religieuse* in which *le philosophe* used as a term of comparison *l'homme de la forêt*—independent, but an uncouth and unsociable anachronism—in order to combat what he considered to be the untenable ethical position of Rousseau.<sup>3</sup>

From the beginning of Bazin's career as a novelist, households have represented a major focus of his interest. For the most part, though, the conventional nuclear family has been depicted in unflattering terms. In his fiction, the more unconventional the household, the more workable it seems. This is true of *L'Eglise verte*. While Godion protests his ordinariness throughout the novel, he is not ordinary at all. A passionate ecologist who believes all life to be sacred, even if he compromises his conscience by refusing a philosophy of vegetarianism, Godion cannot entirely conform to local *mores* in an area in which hunting is a major recreation and the setting of traps and snares for predators and game is regarded as a perfectly normal activity. Godion is a country-dweller without the countryman's acceptance of killing. His ecological beliefs extend to human life too and explain his willingness to afford Monsieur Trente sanctuary. It is surely no coincidence that the offering of sanctuary to the unfortunate and persecuted constitutes a major theme of *Un feu dévore un autre feu* (1978),<sup>4</sup> the novel Bazin published immediately prior to *L'Eglise verte*. The sanctuary afforded to Monsieur Trente and his arrival to live on the same premises as Godion and Claire render an already unusual household a thoroughly unconventional one.

For the most part, Bazin's female characters reject, or at the very least sternly criticize, traditional feminine roles. Claire Godion fits well into this categorization. Although the possessor of a master's degree, she chooses to earn her living as a skilled artisan, the profession of bookbinding allowing her to work at home and in her own time. Her marriage lasted just six months, which was as long as she could conform to a conventional societal role. She comfortably exists with her own sexual nature, gratifying her instincts outside the framework of marriage. Hence her "*vie-de-chatte, aux longues présences entrecoupées d'absences ambiguës*" (24). Just as in *Cri de la chouette* (1972), in which a father's relationship with his step-daughter was one of the themes explored, Bazin in *L'Eglise verte* confronts the sexual revolution as it pertains to one of its principal causes, the young unattached woman without fear of pregnancy. Godion, originally scandalized by his daughter's sexual freedom, finds himself envying, then almost approving it. His attitude is ambiguous and self-interested for he admits at one point that he prefers "*Famant à l'épouseur*" (186). His complicity in the fulfilment of Claire's instincts ensures that the solitude of his widowed old age is attenuated by his daughter's presence. Godion and Claire can live together in harmony because neither judges the other, because each can accept the otherness of individuals within the family unit. Godion's tolerance can thus easily accommodate a situation whereby Claire, without reproach or indeed question, sleeps with a stranger almost under her father's roof and certainly on his property. For Claire, though, who had taken the initiative in offering Monsieur Trente shelter and subsequently in seducing him, such sexual conduct is an affirmation of her freedom as a female animal and involves a determination not only to apply her ecological beliefs to other creatures in nature but also to live them herself. Claire's unconventional features render her an interesting personage, typical of other females in the Bazin canon. She also contributes greatly to the unusual, hence satisfying nature of the Godion household.

---

<sup>3</sup> Diderot, *La Religieuse*, ed. Georges May, Herbert Dieckmann, Jane March Dieckmann, in *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Hermann, 1975) 11: 225.

<sup>4</sup> See Michael Cardy, "A Note on Hervé Bazin's *Un feu dévore un autre feu*," *International Fiction Review* 9 (1982): 50-51.

Several other persistent themes of Bazin's fiction appear in *L'Eglise verte*: the sense of exile for example, as it is manifested in Monsieur Trente's social alienation, or Bazin's passionate attachment to the earth and its expression in certain phenomenological concerns such as the forest or water, in particular river water. The novel possesses a density of texture and a symbolic resonance that will certainly lend themselves to a variety of critical approaches. Hervé Bazin has always been prepared to challenge the assumptions upon which society is based and in *L'Eglise verte* the challenge is direct and fundamental. One of the authority figures of the novel calls Monsieur Trente's rejection of society an "impardonnable désaveu" (207). Bazin questions that judgment, just as Rousseau did two hundred years ago. Indeed, one wonders to what extent the commemoration in 1978 of the bicentenary of Rousseau's death may have stimulated Bazin to write the novel. A reading of *L'Eglise verte* cannot fail to deepen admiration for this highly professional writer who, through his intellectual stamina and refusal to stay still, continues to demonstrate the originality of his vision.