

RADIGUET REVISITED

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What I am returning to here is not so much a writer as a single work—*Le Diable au corps*;¹ not so much the work of a given writer as a text. The considerable labor that went into that novel entitles it to be considered as a true instance of scription. And because Jean Cocteau and Bernard Grasset were both closely involved in the final revisions, the subject of writing is even more problematic than usual. Unraveling the heterogeneity of that subject, however, is not my concern. I am assuming that the unrevised text was already strong enough to determine most of its own revisions and that both Cocteau and Grasset were craftsmen enough to sense that determination; also, there was enough sympathy between Radiguet and Cocteau to prevent their working at cross purposes. What I propose to do is to uncover, beneath the narrative that Radiguet consciously intended to write, a latent text that conveys a different meaning.

"It behoveth us live merrily, nor hath any other occasion caused us flee from yonder miseries." Those words, found in the First Day of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, are echoed by the "quatre ans de grandes vacances" caused by the war, as stated at the end of the first paragraph in *Le Diable au corps*. Radiguet's phrase gave currency to the traditional reading of the novel, a perfectly plausible one (especially to the extent that "plausible" implies conformity with dominant ideology). Henri Peyre summed up such a reading felicitously when he characterized the fiction as "the definitive portrayal of the adolescent in wartime, rushed into manhood and unequal to the emotional demands and responsibilities thrust upon him."² I do not wish to push the analogy with the *Decameron* any further: it does serve to remove the First World War from Radiguet's novel as a specific historical referent while maintaining it as an awesome presence of death, a catalyst for eroticism, even though that presence is first concentrated in one character, Jacques, before

engulfing another, Marthe. Freud, writing at the time of the same war, said that it laid bare the primal man in each of us. The words may seem too strong in the present context, but the war did lay bare an adolescent's eroticism and its attendant cruelty.

Both are implicitly present in the image that is stated twice at the narrative's outset: the cat and the bell jar. It is an ambivalent image, like almost everything else in the novel. On a first level it is somewhat obvious and unproductive. As the adults have broken the jar and hurt themselves in so doing, the cat, that is, the narrator and other adolescents, are free to enjoy things that are normally forbidden. That gives a particular emphasis to the notion of "grandes vacances," but nothing more. The jar, however, is a container and, in Freudian symbolism, may represent the female organ; the breaking of the jar would correspond to the tearing of the hymen, but no blood is mentioned because the narrator is not responsible—Marthe is no longer a virgin when he sleeps with her. Cats have traditionally been associated with darkness, sensuality, and death. Thus, on that second level, the image becomes much more pertinent to the narration. It is Jacques who has broken the jar, and his being a soldier in wartime links him with death. The narrator is both resentful and grateful; grateful because both Jacques's act and the state of war have made possible the affair with Marthe, resentful because he knows he would not have had the courage to do it himself (one will recall how little initiative he displays in his dealings with Marthe and her own reproachful gift of a dressing gown, which he recognizes as a *praetexta*—her reproach for his wishing "rien d'autre que ces fiançailles éternelles" ["nothing other than this eternal betrothal"]).

As I proceed beyond the introductory pages, I am struck by several particularities of the text. First, there is a chronological imbalance that appears to invalidate the initial image. The "grandes vacances," in spite of what the narrator says, were not caused by the war, for one year before its start he had begun a series of "fausses vacances," the period during which he does not go to the *lycée*. Then, when he begins commuting to Paris with his friend René in order to attend classes at Henri-IV he notes simply, "Trois ans se passèrent ainsi" ("Three years passed in this manner")—and reveals no significant instance of misconduct. He does have semi-innocent fun (which he calls *polissonnerie*) with girls of his age and class, but no war was ever necessary for that. Nor is it the war that disrupts the narrator's family life; the father is not drafted, there is no mention of

any relative being killed or wounded. The irregularities or disruptions in his studies are also independent of the war. Actually, the main narrative begins in April, 1917, when he meets Marthe Grangier, and is brought to a conclusion early in 1919 with the death of Marthe. My second-level reading of the bell jar metaphor, emphasizing sexuality and death, is thus congruent with the stress laid on this aspect of the narrative.

The second particularity I notice is the symmetrical articulation of the text. There is, for instance, the incident of the schoolboy, the narrator, who sends a letter to a little girl in another class only to have it intercepted by her parents, and the ensuing embarrassment to himself and others. Toward the end of the novel, his letters to Marthe are intercepted by her parents, and when he is summoned by her mother he again feels like a schoolboy. The day he spends with Marthe in Paris choosing the furnishings that will fill the apartment (and especially the bedroom) where she is to live—the sexual symbolism of which is similar to that of the bell jar and constitutes a positive event from that point of view (he fills the female matrix with his own substance, making her refuse Jacques's)—is echoed by their trip to Paris in search of a hotel room, a sexual quest that is no longer symbolic, a search that ends in failure and a premonition of death. A different kind of symbolism becomes apparent when one adds to the Freudian equivalence between room and woman the more traditional interpretation: as an enclosure, the room may be viewed as sacred space, here that of marriage, from which he is barred on account of Jacques's presence. There are other such correspondences, usually antithetical (thus redoubling the imbalance I previously noted), such as the scandal provoked by the Maréchaud's maid as opposed to the Marin's failure to provide their guests with the one they promised. Emblematic of such oppositions is the contrast between a very early statement, "*les troubles qui me vinrent de cette période extraordinaire*" ("The disorders that arose from this extraordinary time"), and the one that appears in the last paragraph of the novel "*l'ordre, à la longue, se met de lui-même autour des choses*" ("order, in the long run, arranges things"). I shall now move on to a third category of phenomena that are basically of a textual nature, for they will help put everything else into sharper focus.

What dominates the novel textually is the presence of the letter "m" and the set constituted by the letters "m" plus a vowel plus "r." In other words, as the narrative proceeds, it finds itself coming more

and more under the spell of the phrase, “Marthe la morte” (even though it is not literally present in the novel). While the narrator is first motivated by erotic desire, it is gradually death that he wishes for the woman he loves, death and oblivion: “Oui, c’est bien le néant que je désirais pour Marthe . . . ” (“Yes, it was really nothingness that I wished for Marthe”). It should also be remembered that when he first meets Marthe, during an outing with his and her parents, they walk along a small river called Morbras, the first syllable of which sounds exactly like the French word for death. When Marthe leaves to spend some time in Granville, the association between absence and death is stronger than one would normally expect. As Marthe asks the narrator to go to her apartment he says he is reminded of his aunt asking him to visit the tomb of his grandmother. The next paragraph continues to link dead person and absent mistress, Marthe’s bedroom and cemetery.

Marthe, however, is not simply the stereotyped “woman he loves.” Etymologically, the name can be traced back to an Aramaic word meaning lady or mistress, and this leads me to suggest that Marthe really represents Woman rather than *a* woman. Incidentally, this concern for the meaning of proper names is justified by Radiguet himself when, on the occasion of the incident I mentioned above, the narrator asks a classmate named Messenger to convey a letter to the girl he had become interested in. He says he did not pick him on account of his name, but Radiguet chose (or maintained) that name just the same. One should also note that Marthe’s name has four letters in common with that of the river Marne and especially that the first three are identical. The narrative involving Marthe is clearly set against the background of the Marne. After she marries she goes to live close to the river; when the narrator goes to spend his first night with her, he follows the bank of the river. Earlier, when he would go to read books in his father’s rowboat, he was too scared to take it away from its mooring, and now when he goes boating with Marthe it is she who does the rowing thus suggesting that the river is her domain. The narrative also includes an indication that the two words function in similar fashion. When the narrator first mentions the Marne he points out that his sisters, when referring to the Seine river, call it “une Marne” because it is a word meaning river rather than the name of *a* river. In similar fashion, later in the novel, Marthe’s spinster sister-in-law refers to “une Marthe.” The link between Marthe and Marne allows me to take one step further thanks to the symbolic association

between water and mother: to the narrator Marthe is not only Woman but also Mother. In the context of *Le Diable au corps*' narrative this is reinforced by the meaning of the noun "marne," which corresponds to the English "marl," a mixture of clay and calcium carbonate used to fertilize certain types of soil. Furthermore, the connection is made in the narrative itself; the night of their first intercourse, as the narrator arrives soaking wet because of the rain and Marthe urges him to take off his wet clothes so as not to catch cold, he notes, "ce déshabillage prenait un sens maternel" ("this undressing took on a maternal meaning"). After they make love he sees her transfigured and is surprised that her face is not surrounded with a halo "comme dans les tableaux religieux" ("as in religious paintings")—for one second, she is the Holy Mother. When they eventually realize that she has become pregnant the narrator makes an explicit identification: "Hélas! Marthe n'était plus ma maîtresse mais une mère" ("Alas! Marthe was no longer my mistress, but a mother"). The shift is symbolically completed at the end of the novel after the baby is born and turns out to be a boy—Marthe gives it the narrator's name. It is the name she calls out when she dies; one cannot be sure whom she calls, son or lover, and it does not really matter. It seems hardly necessary to point out that the French word for "mother" shares the same initial pattern as the word for death and the name of Marthe and the river Marne: "m" plus vowel plus "r."

Consciously or not, Radiguet inscribed the same pattern quite frequently into the novel's text. The councilor whose maid goes berserk is named Maréchaud; the one who lives under Marthe's apartment is Marin. The first time the narrator sees Marthe she is standing on a *marchepied* on the train bringing her to La Varenne. When they part he says he will come to see her the following Thursday and lend her a couple of books, but he cannot bear to wait that long and on Tuesday (*mardi*) he takes the books to her. His birthday comes in March (*mars*) and during that same month he and Marthe first make love together; their child, prematurely born the following January, was due in March. Early in their love-making she asks him to brand her (*marquer*) and when she is pregnant he remarks that he has done so, but in the worst possible way. My point in noting these occurrences is to suggest a kind of obsession, on the part of the writing subject, with that syllable on account of the stress it lays on the notions of Woman, Mother, and Death. In similar fashion, the reader's attention is, through the repetition of that syllable, drawn to the

connections I have been making. Whether or not a reader actually makes the connections depends on the attentiveness of his or her reading as well as sensitivity to textual matters.

I shall now examine several incidents or statements in *Le Diable au corps* in the light of the foregoing observations. First, there is the story of the Maréchaud's maid, which the narrator calls his first memory of the war, although it took place on the eve of July 14th, 1914, a couple of weeks before the war actually started. He relates it after he has alluded to the war's beginning and told of minor events in the family occurring toward the end of August: the chronological imbalance is thus compounded. The incident can be read as apparently intended, a poetic transposition of the strangeness and horror that characterize times of war. It is nevertheless more pertinent to the major narrative line, the story of Marthe, of which it is almost a *mise-en-abyme*. It is centered on a young woman, apparently gone mad, who cavorts on the roof of her employers' house, thus causing a public scandal that the latter try to ignore. Likewise, the public display by Marthe of her affection for the narrator on a Sunday afternoon shocks those who know her ("Ils durent y voir une fanfaronnade" ["They must have thought I was boasting"] he says), and eventually the ultimate scandal, Marthe giving birth to the narrator's child, will be hushed up by her family and their doctor. The voice of the woman on the roof is described as inhuman, throaty, exceedingly soft, and later when the narrator, out of prudence, refrains for a while from spending the night with Marthe he is relieved at not having to hear a comedian's angelic voice, who seems "chaque matin sortir de l'au-delà" ("each morning to come from the beyond"). The scandal caused by the Maréchaud's maid is highlighted by activities connected with France's national holiday, and that caused by Marthe's behavior is made worse because her husband is in the army in time of war. Most importantly, the incident suggests the stereotyped association between women and madness (the narrator says his mother "me voyait perdu par une folle" ["thought me corrupted by a madwoman"]) and the narrator watches her as if under a spell. After she finally jumps off the roof he falls in a faint just as he will experience what he calls a syncope after the death of Marthe. Going back home with his father he imagines seeing the ghost of the maid; it is only Maréchaud himself, in his night dress, "contemplant les dégâts, sa marquise, ses tuiles, ses pelouses, ses massifs, ses marches couvertes de sang, son prestige détruit" ("contemplating the damage, his

marquee, his tiles, his lawn, his flower beds, his steps covered with blood, his demolished prestige"). That will also be the narrator's unstated condition at the end or, rather, that is what he surveys as he writes his version of the story: the crumbling of his adolescence at the hands of Marthe.

The Maréchaud episode introduces another couple, a nameless one. They are political opponents who attempt to capitalize on the Maréchauds' plight. She makes a hypocritical speech, quoted in full, and the people assembled to watch the spectacle are not impressed. Moments later the husband makes his speech, which is not quoted, and the people applaud. This is typical of the difference in treatment accorded men and women throughout the book. In addition, the other women involved are mothers.

In the early pages of *Le Diable au corps* the narrator mentions both his parents in seemingly objective fashion, but closeness to his father is emphasized. On the Sunday of the meeting with Marthe, both families are included. His own mother, however, is unaccountably absent: she has been erased from the text. Of Marthe's mother, he says that he disliked her at once; the father, on the other hand, seemed "un brave homme" ("a fine man"). The narrator's first statement to Marthe, intended as a gallantry, is: "Vous ressemblez peu à madame votre mère" ("You don't resemble your mother"). After his liaison with Marthe has been consummated, he notes the difference in his parents' attitude: the father not only tolerates the situation, he seems inwardly pleased, while the mother is both jealous of Marthe whom she consequently dislikes and worried about what people will say. When Jacques comes home on leave and Marthe behaves strangely, her mother decides to take her back. She refuses to have a bed set up for Jacques in her room. Her father thinks her attitude absurd and her mother points out to him and to her son-in-law "qu'ils ne comprenaient rien à la délicatesse féminine" ("that they understood nothing of feminine delicacy"). Irony readily comes through such a seemingly objective account, for both narrator and reader know there is no delicacy involved but a growing dislike for Jacques as a result of her passion for the narrator. The result is to downgrade the notion of "feminine delicacy" and Madame Grangier as well. In subsequent episodes of the narrative she is treated in similar fashion; she eventually discovers the truth but says nothing for fear of magnifying the scandal. She stupidly harrasses her daughter, at the same time secretly admiring her for having done what she herself had never

dared. Like Marthe's father, Jacques's is termed a "brave homme." His mother, like "toutes les mères," disapproves of her daughter-in-law. In the last pages of the book, the narrator alludes to the distance that separates him from his mother. As he collapses, she takes over: "Les yeux secs, elle me soigna froidement, tendrement, comme s'il se fût agi d'une scarlatine" ("With dry eyes, she nursed me, coldly, tenderly, as if it were a case of scarlet fever"). In other words, she did her duty and she did it in a way that bespeaks authority and competence.

He is, on the contrary, very close to his father. The latter is clear-sighted, not easily fooled. He is indulgent to the point of encouraging his son's whims. His displays of severity are followed by forgiveness, and he tends to let his son do whatever he wishes. When things appear to be getting out of hand, he threatens to have Marthe prosecuted for abducting a minor, but he of course does nothing. Earlier, when he decides to remove his son from school, it is his wife who notifies the principal and chooses the time for doing it. The father is obviously lacking in authority. The observations he makes to his son are sad, while his wife's remarks are sarcastic. He is weak, but his son understands him—undoubtedly a "brave homme" like the others.

In short, the men, including Jacques (who is just an unfortunate victim) are treated more sympathetically in the narrative of *Le Diable au corps* than the women, especially when the latter are mothers. And Marthe who is both, actually and symbolically, is treated worst of all. Where love is concerned the narrator is ambiguous or even contradictory. On a number of occasions he speaks of his love for Marthe, but he also says that it weakened in the presence of the slightest obstacle and is seized with panic at the thought that Jacques might allow himself to be killed. He admits that what seemed like a display of passion to Marthe, when he kissed her as she was rowing the boat, was "surtout la manie de déranger" ("above all the need to disturb"); he recognizes that his attitude is that of a libertine and compares his voluptuousness to the behavior of a drug addict. Actually, his problem is that he cannot stop thinking of himself; he does get at the contents of the bell jar, and self-gratification is his overriding aim.

The narrative of the day on which Marthe enters the picture is vaguely reminiscent of Stendhal's account of Madame de Reynal, as the object of Julien Sorel's first advances, but the narrator lacks Sorel's purposefulness. And as the beginning of the novel clearly indicates, his adolescent eroticism had already been aroused before

his meeting Marthe; she intensifies it by providing a willing and then a loving object. The narrator deludes himself in calling his own feeling love. Radiguet in turn might well have suffered from the same delusion, for he referred to *Le Diable au corps* as “ce drame de l’avant-saison de l’amour”³ (“this drama of the beginning of love”) thus allowing both the conventional reading and the present one. One might say, if one were dealing with actual persons, that the narrator’s ego drive is too strong, and this would account for the presence of the death drive to which I also alluded. One will recall that when he thinks Jacques has returned unexpectedly, he hopes the outraged husband will kill both Marthe and himself. I have already pointed to a weakness in his sexual drive; there is something about the Mother that disturbs him and affects his emotional relationship with Woman. Add a weak father who fails to exert his authority, and one understands the narrator’s statement, “Sans doute sommes-nous tous des Narcisse” (“Undoubtedly we are all Narcissus”). As Julia Kristeva recently put it, “N’est-il pas vrai que le narcissique, tel quel, est précisément quelqu’un incapable d’amour?” (“Isn’t the narcissist, precisely, someone who is incapable of love?”).⁴ Radiguet’s narrator practices eroticism, but he cannot find an object of love outside of himself. Hence his unwitting cruelty.

In conclusion, my revisiting *Le Diable au corps* has convinced me that, rather than a classical narrative endowed with universal value, it is a very particular text that wrestles with the consequences of the narrator’s poorly resolved Oedipus complex. As to the connection between Radiguet and the narrator, since I have neither the space nor the competence to analyze that relationship in any adequate fashion, I shall leave it to psychoanalysts to probe such a complex matter: they need only follow the trail that Radiguet has blazed for them.

NOTES

1. Raymond Radiguet, *Le Diable au corps* (Paris: Grasset, 1923). There are other editions; since the novel is brief, and references can be located easily, I have refrained from adding cumbersome footnotes.

2. Henri Peyre, *French Novelists of Today* (New York: Oxford UP, 1967), p. 63. Claude-Edmonde Magny, in her *Histoire du roman français depuis 1918* (Paris: Seuil, 1950), sees it as “une révélation lucide sur le fond de l’existence” (“a lucid revelation about the nature of existence”) (p. 120).
3. Raymond Radiguet, *Les Joues en feu* (Paris: Grasset, 1925), p. 13.
4. Julia Kristeva, *Histoires d’amour* (Paris: Denoël, 1983), p. 38.