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Le Conte Fantastique en France de Nodier à Maupassant

BY CASTEX

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Just as a pleasure which is indulged discloses an unsatisfied hunger, so the existence of the 'fantastic tale', its perpetuation and constant change, indicates hidden needs and desires that lie unfulfilled in the human spirit. It may even be said that nothing is more revealing about man than these extreme art forms, which are at once civilised and primitive, peculiar and all-embracing, highly-coloured and quickly dated. Moreover, it is the author's credulity as much as the reader's which invests them with their varied role of offering enlightenment, or compensation, or revelation.

For it is essential that the writer himself believes in the fantasies which he unfolds; his belief may be purely

aesthetic, but *while he is writing* his mood must be entirely free of scepticism, irony, or other established habits of common sense. The French storyteller is by nature reluctant to assume a convincing attitude of goodwill towards the supernatural or the mysterious, while his readers will lose interest when they have reason to believe that an author has not taken his stories seriously. Thus, periodically, stories of fantasy gradually lose their appeal, until some one comes along with a new style or setting for the horrific and the unspeakable. In this way these tales of 'pathos or mystery', as M. Castex calls them, fall into oblivion; but they are nevertheless of consequence in the history of ideas and

of man, or in the particular history of an enigmatic writer.

It was doubtless because of this double importance that M. Castex undertook to trace the evolution of a type of tale which remained alive during the whole of the romantic period, but which tends to be disregarded to-day.

In his book M. Castex tries to show that the vitality and diversity of the development of the literature of fantasy in France is in no way less admirable than in its native Germany and England; and since there are numerous and excellent examples of this sort of literature not only where the imaginative faculty is bubbling and irrepresible but also among the most rational people in the world, given to sermonising and controlling their exuberance, it shows that this type of literature truly corresponds to a constant disposition of the human soul.

Nevertheless, M. Castex's research, analyses, and comparisons make it clear that the 'fantastic' tale in France takes profoundly different forms from other literatures of the imagination—German, Slav, or Oriental. In general, the French storyteller is more of a psychologist and more personal, and not only does he not become the dupe of his own extravagant inventions, but he tries to emphasise his detachment, openly or with subtlety, in order to *disillusion* his reader, in spite of the rule that in this type of writing it is most important to maintain an illusion.

In fact, an exhaustive study of this kind, both in its aim and method, ends by laying bare a physiology of the imagination, which shows it circulating

in our thoughts like the blood in our veins, setting forth from a central source, fanciful on departure, sober on return, as it goes the rounds now rambling, now strengthening, now subdued. It is rarely seen in its pure state as a living and truly creative force, but more often as at work in the memory linking those images, and then disconnecting and rearranging them, all the while very carefully taking advantage of the resulting disorder. A reconsideration of those works which stimulate the imagination serves thus to show how the harnessing of this faculty rounds to the advantage not only of our wisdom but also of our happiness, our potentialities, and our goodwill.

Despite the abundance of original ideas, supported by extensive and accurate research, and despite the accumulation of facts at the disposal of modern criticism which M. Castex has carefully used, his book remains orderly and clear. Broadly historical, while analytical and comparative in design, it achieves an aesthetic and psychological synthesis both of this genre of literature and of each of the authors to which its chapters are devoted. Furthermore, reference to the book is facilitated not only by the indispensable index and a careful but explicitly critical bibliography, but by an analytical table, a kind of syllabus which permits the reader of the 466 informative pages of this volume to find quickly the exact passage to which he wishes to return or which he desires to criticise. These details of composition are by no means negligible in relation to so considerable a body of judgments and, in addition to the

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pleasure of reading it, they make the book an almost perfect aid to study.

M. Castex's first concern was to define carefully the limits of the tale of fantasy and to discover its precursors before trying to depict its modern developments. He is also concerned at the outset with differentiating between fantasy and the traditional wonder tale, by insisting that in contrast to mythology, folklore, or religious mysteries, which are external to man, fantasy should be linked with his psychology and be characterised 'by a brusque intrusion of mystery into the realm of real life . . . linked with the morbid tendencies of the conscience which, in the phenomena of nightmare and delirium, projects before it images of its anguish or its terror' (p.8).

We can see the use, and the danger, of such a definition, which its author will be led, moreover, to alter, enlarge, and render more specific. Besides permitting an estimate of the value of works within its scope and an exclusion of those which do not belong, it serves perhaps to justify a certain choice, a partnership between the author and his subject which might even be called a defence of his prejudices. This is not a reproach; it is in no sense like supporting an objective principle which strong preferences succeed in overwhelming. Rather it is the germ of first-class criticism, the most humble attitude to adopt towards the men of genius one is discussing, and, in any case, the prerequisite of serious work.

The author devotes the first few pages to the persons responsible for

the rebirth of irrationalism in France at the end of the eighteenth century: *illuminati* or adventurers, believers or charlatans; Swedenborg, Martines, Saint-Martin, Mesmer, Casanova, Saint-Germain, Cagliostro—it is not surprising to see that their influence spread in every circle, religious, aristocratic, and popular. To hold communication with hostile or benevolent forces from the beyond and to employ improperly understood physical forces to satisfy an instinct for domination are temptations due as much to curiosity as to credulity. What is more astonishing is to see men, writers, whose character and activities normally preserve their stability, slowly succumbing to a spell which at first they distrusted, and indulging in hopes by which, formerly, they refused to be deluded.

This is what happened to Jacques Gazotte, the French precursor of the 'fantastic tale'. In the stories which preceded *Le Diable Amoureux*, he is not yet among the *illuminati* and, antipathetic to the idea of reason propagated by the philosophers, he confines himself to imagining impossible adventures and, a little cynically, makes fun both of himself, as the author, and of those who succumb to his influence. 'Midway between the fairy story, which defies probability, and the realistic story, which dispels any mystery', he succeeds in reconciling 'two opposed types of invention, thus creating a mixed genre which later is to be known as the fantastic'.

When he wrote *Le Diable Amoureux* in 1772, he knew enough of the occult theories to present the events in his story as the outcome of an initiation.

But beyond or beneath the level of magic, Gazotte does not allow his hero to criticise the entirely normal and human feeling of resistance to the desires of the flesh; it is this psychological realism sustained in a completely diabolical or angelic atmosphere which was to remain one of the hall-marks of the French tale of fantasy.

After *Le Diable Amoureux*, Gazotte took his occultism seriously and devoted the last years of his life to esoteric research. Though denying his support of any particular sect, he allowed his personal mystical views to dominate not only his writing, but, believing himself to be among the elect, his whole life. This practice brought him, at the time of the Revolution, to the scaffold. Thus arises the legend that these stories, which were originally written merely for pleasure, should now be re-read as if they were symbolic or prophetic. This new, and perhaps false, Gazotte calls to mind the influence which he exerted on such poets as Gautier, Baudelaire, and even Apollinaire, but above all on Nodier and Nerval, on M. G. Lewis in England and on Schiller and Hoffmann himself in Germany.

This first and excellent chapter which begins M. Castex's work appears, then, as a kind of restoration of Gazotte's reputation, doubly deserved both on account of his initiative and his influence.

But M. Castex knows quite well that the real originator, as well as the master, of this kind of writing, is Hoffmann. The following chapter traces the curve of Hoffmann's fame in France, from the first translation of Loève-Weimars,

in 1828, including the polemical discussions which it inspired in the Parisian reviews, up to his triumph, in 1830, at the expense of Sir Walter Scott. From that time onwards, Hoffmann's influence remains general and unquestioned. He is imitated, parodied, plagiarised, or merely avoided; but he remains the principal support of all the writing for which mystery, in whatever sense, provides either the pretext or the subject-matter.

M. Castex enumerates and classifies the fantastic stories between 1830 and Maupassant, before they began to be written in large numbers. Here, he is able to show, parallel with the change in taste, the development as influenced by Allan Kardec, Eliphas Lévi, and Edgar Allan Poe. Although he underlines the fact that Hoffmann's influence declined as Poe's increased, one must ask whether M. Castex has attributed sufficient importance to the latter's role from the time when Baudelaire made him known to the French public.

It is possible that he has relied too much on the works, certainly very complete, of Léon Lemonnier; or that he feels less sympathy for the externalisation of what he calls 'frenzies of conscience' than for the more charming fancies; or that, in his eyes, Poe's lucidity is excessive.

M. Castex has also an opportunity for considering more precisely the technique of an art which is compelled to leave its readers spellbound on pain of forfeiting its existence, which is each time more difficult to do as the best effects become dulled.

Classification, development, technique are the concern of the encyclopaedic

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chapters entitled *L'Age d'Or*, *L'Equilibre*, *Le Renouveau*, and *Le Regain*.

This general review of the subject prepares us for the second part of the work, *Les Maitres du genre*, which is most delightful and at the same time penetrating; and in which the reader is free to praise or blame according to his personal preferences. A desire for information gives way to a lively interest which provokes the reader either to reject or approve. It is impossible to be indifferent about chapters which are so precisely labelled: *Nodier et ses rêves*, *Balzac et ses visions*, *Gautier et son angoisse*, *Mérimée et son art*, *Nerval et son drame*, *Lautréamont et sa frénésie*, *Villiers de l'Isle Adam et sa cruauté*, *Maupassant et son mal*.

The pages devoted to Nodier seem to have borrowed something of his charm and ethereal quality. The analysis, however, is very detailed and discloses Nodier's hesitation in the face of the theories put forward by the *illuminati*. As his moral restlessness increased, he was consoled more and more by his imaginative fancies which found an ever increasing place in his work. From the point of view of a hard-hearted layman, M. Castex deserves perhaps to be reproached for his indulgent attitude towards, for instance, *La Fée aux Miettes*. His clever exposition, which describes Nodier as wishing to 'confound scientific dogmatism and, conversely, to honour the wisdom of the lunatics', does not alter the fact that the *naïveté* of the story makes it almost unreadable today. Fortunately, on the other hand, he takes a harsher view of *Ines de las Sierras*, the very failure of which demonstrates Nodier's true

originality: for it is because he wished to overcome his capricious and easy-going nature and discipline himself, as did Mérimée, to use a stricter technique, that Nodier exchanged his charmed and gracious world for another realm as incoherent as it was artificial.

When we come to the long and eloquent defence of Balzac's insight, we at once recall Max Jacob's quip (was it a quip?): 'Whole generations have been corrupted by Balzac and his great fresco, *La Comédie Humaine*, in which nearly everything is elemental ...'

Who is right? It is true that such novels and tales of fantasy as *Louis Lambert* or *Séraphita* are not included in the cycle of *La Comédie Humaine* and that these two kinds of works satisfy different facets of a complex character, at once mysterious and materialist. Could it be that more than all others, the mighty Balzac would be so transparent? For the object of our curiosity corresponds to the kind of person we are; we are trying only to find ourselves, and it is when we project ourselves in an action or a work that we discover our true identity. A lover dreams only of love, a miser of money, and a mystic of heaven; and Balzac's powerful imagination dreamed only of purely intellectual, creative force. Thus does the young Louis Lambert outstrip M. Teste in ambition: 'We attempt to find in ourselves the indescribable phenomena relating to the generating of thought which Lambert hoped to discover in their earliest stages, in order to be able, some day, to describe the unknown mechanism.' In the myth of *Séraphita*, on

the contrary, he remains faithful to Swedenborg's teaching and seeks to achieve a different conquest whereby thought would be led into the realm of the supernatural. This alternating between optimistic enthusiasm and a return to human conditions characterises all Balzac's tales of fantasy and gives them their common denominator. Their unreality is no longer unwarranted; what matters is the novelty and daring, and the probability or possibility of the idea of which they are symbols. From this it is possible to see that Balzac's fantasies are not so divorced from his realist novels and that the same current of ideas runs through both, though it appears not to be at all the same. It is this fundamental unity which M. Castex, following so many others, has tried to define and which he formulates in a conclusion which we should like to quote: 'With the same skill, he knows how to make us feel the imagined scenes or transform the observed scenes into a phantasmagory. As he makes us believe the reality of his fantasies, so he reveals to us the fantasy of reality' (p. 212).

M. Castex's analysis of Théophile Gautier's stories tends on the whole to modernise their interpretation. Where we have seen the imagination take a chance and win, as in the description, in *Spirite*, of a comparatively shining and diaphanous universe, he has perceived a more solid background and the disclosure of a secret of the inner life, which detracts perhaps from the artist only to enhance the character of the man.

After having shown that *La pipe d'opium* mixes genuine experience with

imagined scenes designed for better artistic effect, M. Castex writes that 'in *Le Club des Hachichins*, the character of an experienced adventure is much more accentuated'. On the contrary, in our view, there is no better example of the part played by imaginative composition. For after all Gautier gave the first account of his visit to the Hotel Pimodan in the *feuilleton* of *La Presse* on 10 July 1843. In this, he recorded the mental disorders provoked by opium with a moderation which convinces one that he is telling the truth. In *Le Club des Hachichins*, when his memory had been stimulated by further sessions, Gautier turned them to better account, increasing the confusion of the senses until its excess became absurd, and presenting the whole picture in narrative form, duly planned as a literary composition. Nevertheless, though it is longer, more artistic, and more studied in its effects, its imagination (for the sake of imagination) has stifled its vitality and power.

What, then, is to be said in this respect of Mérimée? M. Castex cannot deny the indifference which this most diffident of authors professes for his own stories; but he thinks that 'by the virtue of his art' Mérimée contrives to make them 'truly frightening'. He tries, therefore, to show that this literary talent is more effective than sincerity, and succeeds by means of a skilfully planned climax in creating illusion and provoking fear. When we consider his evidence more closely, when we try to see, for instance, how, in *La Vision de Charles XI*, Mérimée has altered a rather short but original document, it is plain that the method

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he preferred for producing a better effect is in fact that of development and amplification. Does this achieve the desired result? It does not. Art exaggerates; in *La Vénus d'Ille* all Mérimée's art is unable to infuse its fantastic quality with life. It is not enough to say that the fantasy is ineffective; it is nothing at all, it is ridiculous; and, because of a lack of faith, Mérimée has not been able in any sense to create the haunting atmosphere in which the explicable touches, ever so slightly, on the inexplicable. With the natural world scarcely lost to view, there is no enchantment to facilitate our acceptance of the miraculous. *La Vénus d'Ille* remains interesting to-day solely by reason of the picturesque descriptions and the careful painting of local customs.

As for *Lokis* or *Djoumane*, the psychoanalytical explanation, which supposedly sheds light on their irrational quality while at the same time underlining the author's skill, does nothing to endow them with the least emotive or poetic power.

The pathos of Nerval's case is different, because, as M. Castex notes, the drama of his existence is evident in the transition, at the end of his life, 'from reverie to obsession, from imagined fantasy to real fantasy'.

Different, too, are the disconcerting overtones of a work such as *Aurélia*, born of persistent memories of love and the mystical feelings they evoked, and the slow decline of a conscience into final darkness.

Nevertheless, *Aurélia* itself is less mysterious today than it was at the time it appeared as the genuinely

heroic struggle of clarity against encroaching madness. Reading it even then left a confused impression, either because the description of mental phenomena was thought to have been taken for the first time from real life, or because the reader was overcome by the compactness of the style and the beauty of the language. It showed evidence of the influence of occultism; *Aurélia* was compared to Gazotte's *Diable Amoureux*, and the second part of this autobiographical study in psychoanalysis has the title *Memorables*, which is the same as Swedenborg's *Memorabilia*. But one day criticism turned its dispassionate eye on *Aurélia* and began to destroy the legend which was building up around it. M. Pierre Audiat was the first to show that the conception of the story and even partly its composition were earlier than was believed, and that certain fragments existed before the author's first sojourn in the Picpus clinic in March of 1841. This question of chronology alone was enough to deprive *Aurélia* of its title to being a genuine testimony in the sense of an objective analysis. Criticism went on to show that the writer's project was purely literary. Thus *Aurélia* became not a transcription, but an invention of dreams suggested by occult myths. Invention and not transcription: the difference is important. Instead of resulting from a condition of semi-hallucination, *Aurélia* was to be the product of this unknown mixture from which all works originate, made up of reflection, talent, cleverness, and genius. It follows that *Aurélia*'s obvious superiority must be attributed to the close-knit quality of the text. With so

clear a style, the feeling of poetic bewilderment can derive only from the lack of connexion between the events, the absence of hiatus between the real world and the spiritual realm, and the symbolism which transcends all the incidents—a combination of circumstances which bestows upon the story a natural improbability which is the condition of an acceptable fantasy.

If we move on to consider *La Main de Gloire*, *Soirée d'Automne*, *Histoire du Calif Haken*, and *L'Histoire de la Reine du Matin*, of which M. Castex recalls the literary origins, we reach the conclusion that the further we go the more we see how much these so-called imaginative writers have borrowed. Their imagination rearranges rather than invents, measures rather than over-arches, bridles rather than risks. They have conscientiously examined documents, accumulated notes and consulted their predecessors—activities and precautions which must all stand judgment. As the contribution of learning grows, so does that of involuntary confession decline. Nevertheless it is always enough to leave something genuine and essential, even when it is reduced to the choice of subject, the myth of the hero, or the setting. This is a labour which M. Castex is admirably fitted to do: the analysis of a work; the establishing of the dividing line between the literary recollections; conscientious elaboration or heedless absent-mindedness, deceptive or ingenuous designs; and finally the discovery of its true essence, its shining inner light.

Can a place properly be found for *Les Chants de Maldoror* among these stories whose style and plot mark them

as examples of narrative? Although it is written in prose, its transfigurative power is so great, its inspiration so intense, and its style so lyrical, that it could be more easily considered as poetry. Is not Lautréamont himself comparable to Byron and Mickiewicz? But we can understand easily enough what decided M. Castex to place him between Mérimée and Maupassant. It was not only because there are several episodes in *Les Chants de Maldoror* which together make a narrative whole, but because of the extraordinary character of their fantasy. It is not enough to say that in these tales the fantasy transposes, decomposes, or re-composes reality, or that it is introduced at certain points as a tool of intrigue, terror, or confession. In *Les Chants de Maldoror* fantasy is the end and essence, the precondition and support, and the proud boast of the entire work. The realistic quality of some of the descriptions is only an illusion; we are at once upset by it and can see that it is a malicious trick designed to lead us astray. There is something extravagant and repulsive about it. The element of fantasy is to be found in every word and line as well as in the work as a whole, and we must in this case reverse M. Castex's definition: reality, in *Les Chants de Maldoror*, is no more than a momentary and questionable disturbance of the pattern of a life by nature exaggerated and slightly mad.

In every other case, the characters undergo their ill-starred adventures, and witness, astonished and ill at ease, the transformations attributed to a presence beyond themselves and the author, such as another, invisible character. In *Les Chants de Maldoror*, the

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author, the protagonist, and the conjurer make up a single person who performs in front of us and sets in motion monstrous transformations. Lautréamont has confounded policeman, victim, and executioner, because he himself is the magician exercising his own will. As for the persuasive force of these 'rational terrors', as their author calls them, it is very difficult not to share Roger Caillois' opinion, after collecting the repeated warnings in this lunatic work which put the reader on his guard: 'The artless and funereal imagery which he paints and which, through so many characterisations, justifies the accusation of folly never had such power over him that he lost control of his bewilderment. He never ceased to smile bitterly at the frenzy whose frightful dictates he forced himself to record. He decked them, *ad lib.* with supplementary horror. He provided the show, and sneered at the showman, knowing full well what poor fellow was motioning the gestures of those shaggy puppets in that trashy guignol.' (Preface to the edition of *The complete Works of Lautréamont.*) M. Castex seems to share the same view: for he exclaims about the final episode: 'Strange pages, which after such incomplete sketches produce the whole model and immediately discredit the entire affair by publicly denouncing the author's trickery' (p. 343). In this sense, *Les Chants de Maldoror*, though romantic in character, could pass for the height of intellectualism. The shock, the force, and the motive of their intoxicated passion is entirely the product of thought, and is not at all, in any sense, actually lived. What a

difference in Rimbaud's case, where the shock comes first and the writing follows, where poetry is action before becoming art; and then, silence.

We have to admire the kind of logical connexion that M. Castex has established between the six episodes and the different parts of each of them. But it must be asked whether it would not have been more worth while to consider their remarkable style rather than their logical connexion, which after all has no great importance. In a certain sense paroxysmal literature is neither truth nor art; it is as conventional—and therefore as insignificant—as a certain kind of honeyed sentimentality which we expect to find in a melodrama. But what long, rolling sentences we find in *Les Chants de Maldoror*; what an intoxicating, spell-binding, and yet precise, vocabulary; what varieties of syntax, muted repetitions, and continuity of rhythm, despite the differences of tone. It is this, the style, which makes the book. It is this which gives it its dramatic and poetic intensity, and to its dramatic, and above all its poetic, intensity the work owes its continued influence. *Les Chants de Maldoror* runs no risk, like so many tales of fantasy, of going out of fashion along with other aspects of mystery in the modern world. Because, despite their powerful concentration, their sacrilegious and childish spirit of revolt, and their provoking and meaningless indecency, these impure 'songs' breathe the spirit of pure poetry.

With Villiers, kindly and remote, we return to more typical works, to stories properly called 'fantastic', whose main purpose is 'to attack

severely the foolish obstinacy of common sense' (p. 354), so that the shining superiority of the ideal world should seem yet brighter.

With Maupassant, we come to the literary reflection of biographical data and the indirect, but genuine and increasingly explicit, expression of morbid states and personal obsessions, which develops from the early analysis of fear in *En Canot* to *Qui sait*, the story of a man who ends by asking for his own confinement.

When we come to the end of M. Castex's important work, a question arises: Can fantasy form the basis of an art, or is it only a term to describe the decline of a type of literature? Is it constitutive or ornamental? To some extent the literature of fantasy destroys its own symbolism, in the sense that it claims, at the point where symbols

themselves have become superfluous, directly to describe what the symbols should have been meant to express. And, in another sense, it suffers from an insoluble contradiction: its effect of mercy or horror depends upon a state of mercy or damnation which its author automatically loses the moment he decides between them. If it is handled in cold blood in order to produce certain results, fantasy will be flouted and denounced, and lose at one blow its desired effect. Indeed, the only valid kind of fantasy is to be found in folklore and popular myth in which, as with children, its origin and expression spring from the same motives. Apart from that, in every other case, the literature of fantasy is the dubious and mistaken development of a certain kind of literature which has already lost its identity.