

BOOKS

Between Pinget's Ears

THE brave little publishing house called Red Dust, which operates out of a postal box at Gracie Station, keeps issuing, along with the new poetry from Peru and other such bulletins from the scattered legions of the avant-garde, the works of the esteemed contemporary French novelist Robert Pinget. Recently published, in translations by the indispensable Barbara Wright, are Pinget's first prose work, "Between Fantoine and Agapa," and one from 1980, "That Voice" (\$8.95 and \$10.95, respectively). What can one say of Pinget, as he comes through in Miss Wright's loving translations, except that he conveys, amid much willful murk, an impression of integrity, intelligence, and power? He is a dark author, placidly settled amid his favorite village odors of damp stone and rotting wood (anyone who has stepped into an old French farmhouse will recognize the aroma), and mysteriously content to churn and rechurn the chronic garbled rumors of perversion and homicide that make up his plots, if he can be said to have plots. This reviewer naively hoped that a consecutive reading of a work Pinget produced in 1951 and one published in 1980 would clarify what the author had been "up to;" and indeed certain differences in texture and machination are apparent. But it cannot be said that Pinget began as anything but oddly, opaquely himself; his surrealism has been constant, though its field of operation has become more rural and, as it were, medieval and hellish.

One might suppose "Between Fantoine and Agapa" to have a certain geographical focus and to lay claim to the imaginary territory of provincial France where the later fictions—preëminently "The Inquisitory" (1962), still Pinget's most impressive and cogent work—more or less take place. Alas, one is fooled again, for the little book is a collection of disconnected pranks, or prose poems, which take place not so much between Fantoine and Agapa as between Pinget's ears. The first chapter, or sketch, or whatever, "Vishnu Takes His Revenge," deals with the curé of Fantoine, who is bored. "He subscribes to theater magazines. He dips into the fashionable authors. He

gleans in learned vineyards. He passes for a scholar, but he's a rotter." His parishioners don't provide much amusement for him: "The inhabitants of Fantoine are hopeless. They drink. They work. They drink. Their children are epileptic, their wives pregnant." But then "luckily, someone from Agapa-la-Ville takes an interest in him and sends him a book on Cambodia." The curé becomes fascinated; he teaches himself the Khmer language; he thinks all day of the ancient temples and sees royal dancing girls in the local population. "The for-



est of Fantoine becomes populated with yak demons, with Mrinh Kangveal spirits, with Banra trees. Paddyfields cover the country." Saying Mass, he mistakenly intones, "Hic est enim corpus Yak;" and "a gigantic demon sprang out of the Host, dispatched the curé, and pulverized the church. And Vishnu the Eternal deigned to smile." In the title story, a man, his wife, and their child prepare to picnic between these two fictional towns when a sign in a field proclaims, "Alopecia-impetrating prohibited," and are so frightened that they skip lunch. Later that night, the child vomits jam and the wife's hair stands on end. "But not for long, because half an hour later she was as bald as a coot." But for these two tales, there is no mention of Fantoine or Agapa, and the subject matter gravitates toward the mythic and the facetiously geographic—episodes take place in Manhattan, Menseck, the Forest of Grance, and Florence, and characters include Don Quixote, a parrot called Methuselah, Aeschylus and his maid-servant Aglaia, and the Persian king Artaxerxes. As he roams through these prankish fancies, the young Pinget reminds us of various comrades in surrealism—of Alfred Jarry and his frenzies of mechanical precision:

Everything that touches him, from near or from far, cucurbitaces—I mean: belongs to the gourd family, like the pumpkin—starting with the spirals in shells, cow pats, and velodromes, and ending with his own body, which pullulates with oblate spheroids.

Of William Burroughs and his gleeful wars and plagues:

In short, civil war. And one of atrocious cruelty. Once the steak-tracts had been

launched, an epidemic of the bacteria of contradiction broke out. Every individual affected by the microbe considered that his arm and his head, his eye and his foot, his navel and his spleen, were irreconcilable. He destroyed himself by tearing out, burning, or vivisectioning the contradictory organ.

Pinget also shows something of the antic sunniness of Raymond Queneau and of Beckett's clownish desolation. His playful dabbling with history and myth suggests a host of experimental modernists, from Borges to Barth, from the "Fabrications" of the late Michael Ayrton to the "Eclogues" of our contemporary Guy Davenport. Literary experiment and surrealism have certain natural channels into which to run, it would appear, not so unlike the well-worn grooves of realism; nonsense, being an inversion of sense, is condemned to share a certain structure with it, and its finitude of forms. Pinget, even in this early, rather frolicsome and eclectic work, does look forward to what is to become his mature tone. The last and longest piece in "Between Fantoine and Agapa" is titled "Journal," and, though concerned with such absurdities as snowstorms of fingernail clippings and dwarfs sold at auction to be used as candelabra by religious communities, it foreshadows the sinister cruelty and gloom of the later work. An inbred, joyless, cannibalistic sexuality is a recurrent theme in Pinget, and occurs here: "They mate among themselves, without the slightest desire, and give birth to edible daughters who are a kind of saprophyte." A dreamlike restlessness in the forms of things makes itself felt with a shudder: "Their agricultural work is back-breaking. They . . . tread down the excrescences that tend to form on the fences. I tried this, with the help of a peasant. But just as I was making an oblique movement over the unexposed part I let go my hold, the excrescence came and knocked on my foot, and the man only just had time to push me back out of the way." Pinget's preoccupation with the menace of the organic and with the Stygian stirrings of the dead emerges side by side with characteristic flashes of aesthetic theory: "In a work of art we do not try to conjure up beauty or truth. We only have recourse to them—as to a subterfuge—in order to be able to go on breathing." And the prose, though indeterminate in its significations, is chiselled

in its cadences—so deliberate in its elusive effects that the intimidated reader, coming upon alphabetical formations like “This has been goin-QHQfor so long” and “hnd he passes the laundry again,” doubts whether he is in the presence of a misprint or of an especially refined, albeit obscure, intention.

“**T**HAT VOICE” concerns— Well, what *does* it concern? The phrase “*manque un raccord*” (“a missing link”) is used seventeen times in the French text, the translator claims on the jacket’s back flap, and a phrase rendered as “impossible anamnesis” (“anamnesis”=“recalling to mind”) returns a number of times also, as do “invincible fatigue,” “traces of effacement,” “pssps,” “take a hair of the night that bit you,” and “an invisible manitou.” The author, in a special preface to the American edition, assures us that “the structure of the novel is precise, although not immediately apparent. The different themes are intermingled. One cuts into another point-blank, then the other resumes and cuts into the first, and so on until the end.” The two themes named are “the theme of the cemetery” and “that of the gossip at the grocery.” In the cemetery, evidently, at the intersection of alleys numbered 333 and 777, on All Saints’ Day, near the tomb of the minor belletrist Alexandre Mortin, a young man called Théodore, coming to arrange and leave some chrysanthemums, meets a ghost, or walking dead man, who identifies himself as Dieudonné, or Dodo for short. Dodo, for that matter, is Théo’s uncle. Maybe Théo killed him, for his money. Alexandre Mortin has a brother, Alfred, who perhaps is also called the Master; he seems to be keeping little Théodore in his house by force, according to gossip down at the grocery store, where “that otiose, never-ending story” acquires ever more characters (the servant Magnin, Mlle. Passetant, Mlle. Moine, M. Alphonse, many of whom we have met before in other Pinget novels, or do we just imagine it?) and effaces

itself as it goes, like a slate being covered over and over with new versions, until with the best will in the world the reader starts to feel sandy-eyed and itches to turn on the eleven-o’clock news, where things are said once, or at worst twice. As we grind along in hopes of things coming clearer or of Pinget’s making one of his graveyard jokes (“Just imagine the state of our necropolis, hygienewise, that’ll discourage the All Saints’ Day fans”), the tale seems increasingly to talk about itself:

And little by little, just like that, with the passing days, a sort of stupid litany which took the place of a chronicle for us, you see how very backward we were.

For indeed, the dead do answer.

Indeed, in such a close-knit village, the dead are not allowed to die; they continue to hold their place in the fabric of gossip, of remembrance, their deaths incidental within the pervasive dissolution of life erasing itself as it goes. The atmosphere is deadly, dank, musty: “Old formulas, old papers, old filth, old chimeras, everything is disintegrating.” Rural France is Catholic France, and on this ground modernism joins hands with the pious macabre, with the supernatural’s Gothic underside, “in touch with putrefaction and decomposition, hence oriented toward the future.” Here voices matter-of-factly proclaim, “I went back into my tomb, where I’m awaiting the resurrection of the dead,” and what may be the author’s voice murmurs, “The life to come, it conditions,

it contorts, it confuses, it’s just life.”

Pinget locates us in the gently moldering, nowhere solid hell (a word that originally denoted not so much punishment as simple bleak survival in a vague netherworld) of communal remembering, of mutual awareness, never exact, never erased. “Something else is being prepared beyond people’s consciousness, it had to be reshaped first, we have been at pains to do so.” And we, it must be admitted, have been at pains to read the result. Could the impression Pinget creates be conveyed less exasperatingly, less numbingly? Perhaps not, since its theme, to a degree, is the exasperation and numbness of our human, social, forgetful, banal existence. But why speculate as to the author’s purposes when he has recently been in New York City and spelled them out? To a crowd gathered at New York University last October, Pinget, reading his lucid French text in a hard-to-hear monotone, explained (as translated by Barbara Wright), “My attachment to the technique of the intermingling of themes and their variations is due to the admiration I have always felt for so-called Baroque music.” He is also attached to the concept of the collective unconscious:

In my eyes, the share allotted to the irrational is one of the ways that may help me to arrive at a personal “truth,” which is only to a very limited extent present in my awareness of it. This is a kind of open provocation to the unconscious. . . . We are all, indeed, more or less dependent on the



“I believe you know Mars, God of Defense.”

collective unconscious, whose nature we can only glimpse by examining as best we can those manifestations of it which we perceive in ourselves.

Later in this address, he mentioned Jung, in connection with his own "approach to the dark face of language, in order to make it easier for unconscious values to break through." He spoke of "my declared intention, from my very first book, to extend the limits of the written word by replenishing it with the spoken word." Confusion, contradiction, "all the suggestions, refutations, prolongations, and metamorphoses of fragments of speech" are intrinsic to this intention; his reader will have "the impression that the book is being composed, and decomposed, under his very eyes." Not that the books are written for the eye; they are "to be listened to, rather than read."

We are put in mind of "Finnegans Wake," Jungian in its attempt to show the world mind in its sleep, and also employing a tone of unremitting gossip, of multiple murmur. Language is, at bottom, a spoken thing. From the overthrow of Latin by Dante's Italian and Chaucer's English to the modernists' rejection of Georgian prosodic proprieties in favor of jagged colloquial rhythms, written literature has deferred to the evolving reality of speech. Defoe, Addison, Wordsworth, Mark Twain, Joyce, Hemingway, Henry Green—all refreshed themselves at the springs of the demotic idiom, and forged their styles in conscious opposition to "literariness." But the chronic shucking of tired literary conventions is itself a literary maneuver, and in Pinget's case a heavy escort of cerebration and deliberate experiment marches with his "fragments of speech." On the excuse of Alexandre Mortin's being a minor poet, many abstruse theoretical remarks are interwoven with the voices of "That Voice": "And analyzed the whys and wherefores, and finally decreed that poetry had no existence outside a certain system or method." In his address at New York University, he announced, "I have great respect for the present-day critical methods." And, moreover, behind his work, with his persistent rumors of the old religion, lies a less orthodox religious impulse:

The *Homo religiosus*, linked to the essential—if we admit his presence in every one of us—rebels against the lacerations produced by the succession of days, and seeks refuge in the time which

knows neither succession nor laceration, that of the Word.

This comes from a beautiful statement given to the Mainz Academy of Sciences and Literature on the subject of "literary baggage." "The sole 'baggage,'" Pinget says, "that helps us to conquer chronological time and to participate in the other, absolute time, is a bouquet of texts . . . Light baggage, buzzing with words, which, ever since the world has been the world—and there are many legends that vouch for it—has ensured our passage, without let or hindrance, over onto the other bank."

In the meantime, we are on this bank of earthly clay, and this reviewer would be doing less than his duty if he did not admit that he found "That Voice," as an experience of readerly immersion in a fabricated world, less compelling and more mannered than, say, Pinget's "Libera Me Domine," which it resembles in ambition and milieu. The sinister, shifting rumors of dark deeds done amid rural stagnation had a force there that here seems lost amid the pleasures of a self-professedly intricate counterpoint. A perfected artistic method can serve, unfortunately, to insulate the artist, to dull his recourse to the actual. "Between Fantoine and Agapa," for all its buffoonery, was a venture into the unknown; "That Voice" is a demonstration of a master's method, in a territory thoroughly subdued.

—JOHN UPDIKE

SOCIAL NOTES FROM ALL OVER

[From the Brunswick (Maine)
Times Record]

The Georgetown Working League met at the church vestry Tuesday at 10 a.m. to work on projects to sell at the August sale. Two new members were welcomed: Ruth White and Marilyn Landry. Hostesses were Betty Smith and Ruth White. Flowers decorating the tables were sent by Ida Gunnell who was unable to be present.

One member began to sing: "I'm a little prairie flower, growing wilder every hour, No one ever plays with me, Cause I'm so very wild, you see. I'm wild, I'm wild, I'm wild!"

Then another lady said her husband sings: "Today is the day they give babies away, with a half a pound of tea—if you know any ladies that want to have babies, send them up to me!"

That set the mood for the business meeting and President Bea Barrett quickly took advantage of the gala mood to delegate jobs for the luncheon, for the sale and for all the necessary work to be done at the fair. The luncheon menu will be salads, rolls, stuffed eggs and a good dessert—all subject to change before the luncheon, of course! A good meeting.