

Pessimistic Diversions

LIBERA MI DOMINE

By Robert Pinget.

Translated by Barbara Wright.

239 pp. Red Dust, Box 630, New York, N. Y. 10028.

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PASSACAGLIA

By Robert Pinget.

Translated by Barbara Wright.

96pp. Red Dust, Box 630, New York, N.Y. 10028.

\$6.95

By **JOHN STURROCK**

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ROBERT PINGET, Swiss-born and a lapsed barrister is one of the current French novel's few indisputable glories. He has been publishing since 1950 books both singular and fantastic. He is a writer at once - hugely diverting and incurably pessi-

mistic, like his obvious master, Samuel Beckett. He represents what you might call the bucolic element in the anti-novel. His stories are all of them set in his own weirdly eventful corner of the French countryside, in a landscape of the mind to be found "Between Fantoine and Agapa," as the title of his earliest, ground breaking collection of stories had it. To this continuity of place Mr. Pinget adds a sardonic continuity of persons too, since the same characters keep turning up from book to book. Or if not the same characters exactly, then the same names of characters, because there is nothing so stable or reassuring as an orthodox "character," of settled habits and biography, in the disturbingly erratic narratives that Mr. Pinget has patented.

There could be no finer introduction to the mind-bog-

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gling uncertainties of life in that blighted arcadia between Fantoine and Agapa than "The Libera Me Domine," the longer, wilder and more endearing of these two Pinget novels, now supremely well translated by Barbara Wright. The uncertainties come about because his narrators are men obsessed, with a fearsome urge to reconstruct the past; the one thing they have no time or mind for is the immediate present. The past, however, won't play the game, it won't be reconstructed; there are plenty of bits of it lying to hand, picturesque shreds of local legend, but they don't fit together. Instead of one past in this novel there are many, all contradictory of one another. What happens on one page is likely to cancel out what happened on the page before. Events quickly change their nature, people equally quickly change theirs, and the result is a hilarious inability to come to any fixed conclusions at all. Like each of Mr. Pinget's novels, "The Libera Me Domine" is the record of

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someone failing lamentably to construct a single coherent story, but that record is so rivetingly, so eloquently told, that this failure has to go down as a thumping success.

It seems that a small boy was once murdered in the village. Little Louis Ducreux was found strangled in the woods one hot July day. Or did he have his throat cut by a sex maniac? Or did he drown accidentally in the lake? But then, wasn't it actually one of the other Ducreux children who died, and wasn't he knocked down by a lorry in the village street? No, surely that wasn't a child but one of the grown-ups, Mlle. Lorpailleur the prissy schoolteacher, who was knocked off her bike. Etc. The novel is like some demented coroner's inquest, where the identity of the victim changes with each new question, until it is doubtful whether there was a victim at all.

It is the events themselves that are dead: All the many engaging scenes that are first dreamed up, then redreamed and then erased in "The Libera Me Domine" are said to have taken place a statutory 10 years ago, apart from one or two especially signal episodes of local history that can be dated, equally arbitrarily, to 1873. Which is to say that the facts are happily beyond recall, and we are adrift on an ocean of rumor. Nothing that gets said commands any lasting credence at all.

Yet if this is high farce, it is farce with a black lining to it. The unknown killer of little Louis has never been caught, he is still "on the run," as the novel regularly reminds us. Nor will he be caught, because Mr. Pinget's killer is the killer who will sooner or later get every man, woman and child of us: death itself, the ultimate conclusion that haunts this desperately inconclusive novel, as it haunts all of Mr. Pinget's work.

In "The Libera Me Domine," death migrates with dreadful ease from character to character, changing its form as it goes. And it turns up just as grotesquely in the shorter, more somber novel, "Passacaglia," in which a troublesome, inexplicable corpse turns up lying — where else? — on a dunghill. Unless, that is, it's an overly naturalistic scarecrow removed

from the farmer's field, or the postman in an alcoholic trance, or the village idiot having an attack. Whatever the perfectly unattainable facts of the case may be, the imagination, which is the hero of any Pinget novel, lurches helplessly off into morbid speculation.

Simpletons, inebriates and crackpots frequent the scene so as to show how futile the story teller's ambitions are, for these wandering, vacuous minds are typical of his sources of information as he strives to make himself the archivist of an unreliable community—the "deficiency" of his sources is one of many recurring complaints voiced by the narrator of "Passacaglia." But he keeps at it nonetheless, working at what he poignantly calls his "laborious accumulation of straws in the wind." He has to keep at it: He is nothing more than a voice trying to make up a story, and to stop — to fall silent — is also a death. Mortality can only be kept at bay for as long as the voice continues.

Mr. Pinget's are spoken novels, written in order to be heard. His chief interest in writing them, he has said, is to imitate a particular "tone" of voice and to sustain this over many pages. In a book such as "The Libera Me Domine," the voice is beautifully consistent and rhythmic, and its monologue is irresistible. Mr. Pinget composes his books with the rigor and artful variations of a piece of music: The title, "Passacaglia," is no empty metaphor, the story will certainly have been organized strictly in accordance with that particular musical form. His language is much more artful, more richly inventive than any genuine spoken language: it is the printed word's tribute to the power of the spoken word. Barbara Wright's translation has matched Mr. Pinget's French with wit and skill; she has kept the sense throughout and found the right equivalent sounds. The publication of these two books in the United States was helped by a subsidy; that was money well spent. Robert Pinget deserves more readers.

Author's Query

For a book on Airbrush Art, I would appreciate any information regarding artists, history, invention and patent.

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