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1922

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The “victorious” murderer

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It is particularly interesting for women to know how war modified men’s characters. Did it send them back to their lives more violent or more weary? This is the issue that several books published since the end of the war tried to solve, among which, recently, *The Pleasure Of Killing*, by André Dax.

Put in such general terms, the question is badly phrased: most of the true warriors, violent males driven by their instincts, have died in the war – and that’s for the best – and as for the others, their ability to forget, without which we could not live, gave them back to their partners as they were, quite mediocre.

However, we cannot deny that war imprinted the minds – of those who think, at least – so deeply that many works reminds us of it.

The Pleasure Of Killing is still full, if not of facts of war, of its consequences, my colleague in charge of the book review section will forgive me if I tell I a few words what this book adds to the answer to the earlier question.

War, André Dax proves, wakes up in men its instincts for cruelty, the call to murder remains heard, and the gesture which was a habit during these long years can never be forgotten.

His main character, Michel, after having gotten a taste for women and sex in the tranches, gradually feels the taste for murder rise in him, and, cheated, kills his rival in an almost automatic gesture, as if to pierce the flesh and make the blood of the enemy flow was still something normal and sanctioned by the law.

However, once the crime is committed, he regains consciousness. Should he give himself up to the justice of men? Who is worthy of judging him? But he will expiate his crime by going to the Far East, far away from any civilisation, to live a harsh and difficult life which will redeem himself in his own eyes. Later, the woman he has never ceased to love, as a soldier and as a criminal, will meet him there, and, thanks to love, he will tame the evil beast we all carry within ourselves.

There are in this book many digressions, among other things about the survival of the souls, which, according to Michel, survive generation after generation, offering to men the violent or beneficial heredity of their ancestors.

This book, written in a pleasant if slightly monotonous language is worth to read. André Dax has observed and thought before he wrote. The pages in which he describes the miserable future of Europe, destined to unavoidable decadence, are deep and beautiful. His views on Christianity, which “in nineteen centuries failed its founding goal three times” are right. We can only wish a bit more rationalism from this probably young author, and that, in later works, he base his thesis on more solid scientific grounds.

His theory is right: war brought the old man back to life: these multitudes of heredities which the appearances of civilisation had pushed back deep into our unconscious during this upheaval, like in the aftermath of any exterior and interior turmoil. There is no need for the souls of our predecessors on this earth reincarnate in us to explain this. Soul is a meaningless word. The holdovers from brain and nervous system cells is largely enough, thanks to the heredity of acquired characteristics, to transmit throughout the

centuries visions of murder and the aptitude to renew them. This is also accompanied with ancestral terrors which created gods, souls and all metaphysics. As for violent jealousy which André Dax tells us about, how could we be surprised to see it reborn in organisms unbalanced by war, and sent back by it into primitive barbarity?

Among the first men, war, or more precisely fights, between tribes or between animals were intimately linked to the sexual instinct. Carpentier proved this in a thorough study, “War and sexual instinct” – what François de Curel calls the “dance in front of a mirror” is nothing else than the need for the male to look stronger in front of the female he chose. In time of peace, this instinct changes, and it is moral or intellectual supremacy which men aspire to in order to win women over; but, with such violent tremors as those caused by a war of this magnitude, the varnish which Christianity, moralists and philosophers of all kinds tried to apply on the human machine peels off and the old instincts are uncovered.

It would be childish to be surprised or outraged against such obvious facts, we will only ever be poor beings, full of contradictions and doomed by our very nature to sudden returns to the quasi-animality which was our fate.

I know, among the people, women who complain about the unfortunate change that war brought to their partners’ characters. It is as late as it is useless to lament, it would have been much better to prevent and help the future soldier to be a deserter, logically revolted against the cruel and idiotic order which attempted to make him forget the dearly acquired notions of love and gentleness which made lecherous anthropoids into civilised and loving men.

Let’s hope the “next one” won’t find them in the same state.