



Review

Reviewed Work(s): Pollens by Mahi Binebine

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violates where no violation was necessary. The Minotaur's violence is repeated beyond "Guernica": the painting's gored horse that emblemizes the century's ruptures also represents Dora, the Maar or mare, and the *cauchemar*/nightmare into which her life descends post-Picasso. Maar's forays into emotional terrain are vividly poetic. She depicts how the intense passion lived out with Picasso comes at the price—one she willingly pays—of guilt, betrayal, madness, and solitude.

Readers who are sticklers for historical accuracy will be more satisfied consulting the very documents Avril used as her point of departure. For those willing to take a chance on Avril's poetic license, the book adds a richly, sometimes darkly, human currency to a near mythic twentieth-century figure and to the woman he briefly mythologized.

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BINEBINE, MAHL. *Pollens*. Paris: Fayard, 2001. ISBN 2-213-60996-9. Pp. 194. 15,00 €.

Binebine, who was born in Marrakech in 1959, has gained recognition throughout Europe and North America with his paintings and novels. Although he left France to live in New York in 1994, he has since returned to Paris and pursues his double career there. His fifth novel, which appears a couple of years after *Cannibales* (FR 75.1, 182–83), explores the relationship between North African heritage and life in Western Europe.

In *Pollens*, Pierrot and Sonia flee northwestern France in search of a life free from a sterile existence in which they feel like outsiders. They arrive in Kétama in the Moroccan Rif, where they befriend some local people, including Driss the postal carrier, Ali the gravedigger, Mamma Tamou the madam, and M. le Ministre. None can bring himself to leave the Rif where they all await spring, when the region's hemp harvest pollinates. Ignoring the inhabitants' entreaties that they depart before it is too late, Pierrot and Sonia fall prisoner to the pollen's inebriating effects. In a fit of jealousy over an accidental indiscretion on Pierrot's part, Sonia goes to live with Lord Moussa, the wealthy owner of the hemp fields. Pierrot, who wishes to remain faithful to Sonia, refuses to leave Kétama without her, and from then on subjects himself to a life of physical and mental anguish. For years, he lives for the spring pollination and the dream of being reunited with Sonia. He spends his time smoking at the Atlas Café, telling stories and gambling in a state of intoxication. One spring, during a particularly violent hallucination, he kills the postal carrier's mule, believing it to be Lord Moussa. He is then transferred to a psychiatric hospital, where life is not much different from his existence at Kétama. There Pierrot confides in nurse Léïla, telling her his dreams of returning to Kétama and to Sonia, until a French vice-consul comes to repatriate him.

The use of North African vocabulary in *Pollens* firmly anchors its plot in the specificity of life in the Rif. Yet a more universal question the novel raises is the place of family heritage and ethnicity in a world dominated by immigration and relocation. On a literal level, the novel's title clearly alludes to Morocco's hashish industry and to the life rhythm of those who cultivate cannabis. When the crop blooms and its pollen permeates the air, the resulting euphoria provides an escape from everyday miseries and frustrations. As Pierrot explains, "Le grain de printemps prolonge la vie, dit-on: il empêche les soucis de s'incruster dans le cœur pour le ronger" (33). As incarnation of the necessity of evasion integral to

the survival of the human spirit, the pollen that pervades Binebine's novel takes on a wider meaning. The plural title comes to suggest other illusions that enable one to withstand political tyranny, poverty, and general adversity. More potent than intoxicants in this novel are the characters' memories of absent loved ones that become more powerful through recollection and commemoration. In response to adversity, Binebine puts forth the human powers of creation and invention, of writing and storytelling.

Pollens is entirely composed of Pierrot's fragmented first and second-hand narratives that emerge through the double filter of time and a peaceful cloud of hashish. Personal experience is told from the perspective of a narrator who questions his own sanity and cannot distinguish between truth and fiction. The distinction between dream and reality eventually becomes irrelevant for both Pierrot and the reader. Authenticity is no longer grounded in external reality but is an intangible essence transmitted through writing and reading. Creativity, sparked by absence, is strong enough to populate human solitude. *Pollens* is a fairytale meshing of life and literature where even the saddest stories exude a tranquil beauty. The reader is left with a pleasant feeling of surrealism and, yes, intoxication.

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CENDREY, JEAN-YVES. *Une Simple Créature*. Paris: l'Olivier, 2001. ISBN 2-87929-292-1. Pp. 142. 15,24 €.

Le roman de Cendrey confirme le bienfondé du lieu commun que la violence engendre la violence. Nous y faisons la connaissance de Blanchette, une jeune femme condamnée à une longue peine de prison pour avoir assassiné sa propre fille. Nous suivons son quotidien en cette prison de Caen, morne vestibule du néant et digne représentant de l'univers pénitentiaire en France. Dans la première partie du roman Blanchette se morfond dans l'accablement et le silence. En prison, au début, on attend, puis on s'habitue, et enfin on se résigne, comme Meursault dans *L'Étranger* nous l'a très bien appris. On comprend que tous sauf les plus forts y succombent. Espérer? Attendre? Quoi? Que la justice se soit trompée et qu'on soit libéré? Que les conditions de vie s'améliorent? Que viols, brimades, humiliations, tabassage, chantages, et autres indignités cessent? "Il n'y a pas de lieu moins sûr qu'une prison" (66), constate l'héroïne avec amertume. Qu'on se mette à aimer le travail abrutissant que la direction veut bien proposer aux détenus et auxquels ceux-ci se résignent pour gagner les sous qu'il faut pour acheter clothes et autres articles de luxe non inclus dans les prestations traditionnelles de l'hôtel "mitard"? Qu'on puisse se passer de calmants et tranquillisants? Qu'on oublie le passé? Mais il ne manque jamais à l'appel. Ici il pèse sur une femme aux abois, déchirée entre le besoin de passer aux aveux et d'assumer la responsabilité pour son crime d'une part et la peur de se perdre dans sa contemplation de l'autre. Ses réflexions se teintent d'amertume et de désespérance, comme chez Baudelaire quand il évoque les pires jours du Spleen: "l'Espoir/Vaincu, pleure, et l'Angoisse atroce, despotique/Sur mon crâne incliné plante son drapeau noir" (*Les Fleurs du mal* 78). Blanchette y succombera-t-elle aussi? Non, elle va se révolter et s'évader avec sa meilleure copine. Et alors, comme nous le dit la quatrième de couverture: "cela va faire très mal.... C'est comme si une grenade dégoupillée se mettait à rouler sans qu'on sache exactement où et quand elle va exploser".