

Boris Schreiber. *L'Organeau*. Paris Alésia. 1983. 199 pages. 57 F.

Old age, Lady Gregory is reported to have said, is hell.

Boris Schreiber, in his account of the tormented autumn years of a retired clerk, Fernand Hilaire, would agree with her. Hilaire, in his seventies, lives alone in a small pension, in a single room, his bed in one corner, a makeshift kitchenette in another. As companions, he has three goldfish. Feeding them is one of the high points of his featureless days. A social worker visits him from time to time, trying to persuade him to enter a home. But he clings to what remains of his liberty – the liberty to sit at his window and watch the trains go by, to prepare meals to his own taste, to stroll at night along a nearby canal and watch the barges.

Schreiber, with his skillful command of realistic detail, admirably conveys the sense of solitude and abandonment suffered by so many of the old. During his walks, Hilaire often stops to look in the windows of a neighborhood bookshop, remembering sadly days long past when books he had written were on view. Now everything he has published is long out of print, as completely forgotten as he is. He has no one to talk to except his harpy of a concierge and old Grébain, who lives with his dog in the room next door. Grébain nurses the idea of creating a kind of militant Gray Panthers organization and hopes to enlist the support of his neighbor. But Hilaire finds himself involved in a more exciting adventure. Walking along the canal, he happens to meet, on a deserted barge named *Cora*, a mysterious young woman. He learns that she is the *passionaria* of a band of small terrorists not unlike the American “Weathermen” of the sixties, who rob and murder in the name of social justice. They describe themselves as “des mystiques assoiffés d'idéal”.

As their friendship grows closer, “Cora”, as he calls her, truly becomes “l'organeau” (the anchor ring) of Hilaire's existence. He tells her that he is a writer, and she assures him that she thinks he should be included in the list of writers whom she and her companions believe have inspired their revolutionary action and whose names she intends to release to the press. Hilaire, flattered by this recognition, excited by the idea of “belonging” and of being loved, is drawn into the activities of the gang. He indicates to them a jewelry store they can rob with a minimum of risk. He kills Grébain's beloved dog so that Grébain, desolate, will enter a home and leave his room free to be occupied by Cora. But everything goes wrong. The concierge tells the police that the terrorists are hiding out on the abandoned barge, and in the gunfight that follows Cora is killed.

Schreiber, of Russian origins, has something of the inspired madness of a Dostoevsky in his treatment of an old man longing for love and recognition. But despite its improbabilities, the work is both moving and convincing. *L'organeau* would seem to mark a fresh departure in Schreiber's career; it is more directly communicative, more realistic, more classical in structure than his seven earlier novels. Recognized by certain critics as one of the most authentic talents of his generation, he now seems to be achieving the reputation many feel he deserves.

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