

**SCHREIBER, Boris. *La Descente au berceau*. Paris : Luneau Ascot, 1984. Pp. 434. 119 F**

"Où que je m'éloigne j'aboutis à moi. Et plus je creuse en moi, plus je m'éloigne. (illisible) Tous les chemins mènent à moi. Et j'erre sur tous les chemins (183)... Errer, seule chose que mes erreurs ne m'interdisent pas" (259). These lines were chosen at random item within the three chapters in Boris Schreiber's latest work, a monumental epic-like novel seven years in the making.

The thoughts are those of an excruciatingly tormented mind, of a wanderer, always fleeing and never escaping, burdened by memories of Jewish persecution and of [illisible] progenitors for whom he had felt only hatred and despair, and from whom he had always sought to distance himself. Anguished also by guilt, and the compulsive need for comprehending the horrors of Nazi atrocities of which his parents – denounced by him, in mind, if not in fact – had been victims, he pursues his obsessive quest, seeking to quench his thirst for purity, to salvage any existing traces of his long-lost innocence and hopelessly, hoping to achieve some kind of inner peace. His peregrinations are both physical and philosophical. His chosen routes, vertiginous in time and space. His words flowing abundantly, often torrentially, yield extraordinary images that compare, contrast incorporate, and proliferate more images until the pages are suffocatingly intense web emotion.

Joel is his name – derived from *joie* and *Noël* – and given to him by Mara, the daughter of a long-bearded rabbi, Boruch, a "wise man", a prophet – chosen, or self-appointed perhaps – to update the Old Testament, to create a New Old Testament, to transcribe the intranscribable.

The meeting between Joel and Boruch in Vienna was a chance encounter. Joel had left Paris for Vienna, seeking a short cut to the future by circumventing the present and recapturing the past – longing, initially, for the sugary taste of a special Viennese pastry that could unleash the sweet innocence of his childhood; desiring and needing later the mind and body of a woman that he had known as a young man: "J'ai besoin d'elle pour aborder ce que je fus; j'ai besoin d'être ce que je fus pour aborder ce que je serai, j'ai besoin d'elle pour moi" (202).

While in Vienna, he meets Boruch and is drawn by the prophetic magnitude of the rabbi's project. Joel, for whom the divine is "un fil trop invisible" (81), pleads to have his name inscribed in the Book, only rebuffed by Boruch, "car il faut ou faire partie de notre people, ou faire partie de ceux qui ont saigné" (90). Boruch ultimately direct Joel to South America. There, he could track down some ex-Nazis who were still perpetuating inhumane atrocities amongst the native Indians, and thus, deserve a place in the prophet's work.

The last chapter finds Joel in the depth of hush jungle country along the Amazon where he has located the site of the criminal escapees. His challenge is double: to confront nature in all its wildness – the heat, the wind, the sand, the water; to confront the savagery of the Nazis. Joel does not complete his mission. The executioners distress him. He cannot accept them. He learns to tolerate them, while also seeking solace in the company of a monkey to which he becomes attached. The ultimate challenge for Joel will be his confrontation with death.

Joel's journey was long and despairing. It can be too long repetitive for some readers. For this reader, it was an extraordinary experience.