

SCHREIBER, Boris. *Les Souterrains du soleil*. Paris : Grasset, 1977. p. 313.

At one point in the dialogue of his novel, the narrator-protagonist, Philippe Van Horne [*sic*], queries : “Peut-être faut-il revivre deux fois les expériences primordiales ?” (p. 194). That is what he attempts to accomplish for himself and others upon his return, after World War II, to his paternal plantation in Indonesia. This is the scene of the bulk of the novel, of its most impressive episodes, and of its violent consummation.

“Notre moi ne sera plus un hall de gare,” according to Philippe, when our vital forces are turned inwardly and jealously stocked against the usury of life, “cette sclérose due à nos quotidiennes capitulations devant le quotidien” (p. 171). Whether or not this very masculine protest resonates significantly for the reader, Philippe’s campaign to reconquer *le moi* might seem downright nutty. Glowering with his own ambivalent chastity, he proclaims a ban on copulation to the indigent population. “Dis-leur,” he commands his translator, “que c’est le sperme répandu au-dehors de nous, qui tue le moi. Ici, dans mes domaines, nous allons assister à sa résurrection (p. 267). His audience has no voice or visage of its own, so we have no opportunity to assess the credibility of its reponse. It is the inner pulsations of a mystique, not its social demeanor, that we are summoned to witness. Its faltering, brutal advance is set in a vigorous and flinty style, which blends the ruminative broodings of the first-person narrator with tense and choppy dialogue. Schreiber’s style, I suspect, wants to resemble the jungle he evokes so expertly, not as a lush and chaotic variety, but as the emblem of a compacted, latent power. Thus the ordinary mechanics of expository prose are often reduced to a recondite minimum : “L’impuissance : mettre toute sa force à l’atteindre ; là où mon moi jaillirait. La puissance tout autour, ces racines surélevées, cette nuit, ce gâchis, et puis les menaces, l’anéantissement ; toutes ces puissances guettées par le contraire absolu” (p. 220). The novelist models his style on the narrator’s quest of an implosive, rather than explosive, force.

As bizarre and fantastical as Philippe’s project seems, it serves as an adequate basis for the author’s dramatic and symbolic exploration of the indissoluble bond of sexuality and violence, taboo and terror. Philippe’s self-ordained mission configures a dialectic of creative and destructive forces, a generalized economy of power which bypasses politics and history in order to locate itself, however arbitrarily as it may seem to many, in the viscera. No wonder then if the jungle – “la vie toute originelle, aux couleurs de joie” (p. 193) ; “cette nature proche des commencements” (p. 167) – seems more alive, at least closer to our perception, than Schreiber’s secondary characters. Except in dialogue, they are only perceived as facets of the narrator’s consciousness as they circulate ambivalently about him. His ominous fascination for them may not extend to the reader.

This is a strange novel, both from the viewpoint of its exotic setting – sparsely but trenchantly described – and its erotic mythomania, which is severe but not puritanical in its dramatization. The novel’s discontinuity – “Le Départ” (Indonesia, 1922), “La Fin” (Tripoli, 1965) and “Le Retour” (Indonesia, 1949) form the order in which the story is told – makes for another, strategic difficulty, whose rewards are slow but nonetheless sure in coming for any readers – or rereaders – interested in the symbiosis of sex and death.

From a thematic point of view, this novel must be summed up as a prose fictional companion, however reticent and elliptical, to Freud, Fraser and especially, perhaps even intentionally, George Bataille. Upon reflection, it occurs to me that Bataille’s *Erotisme*, which links the prohibition of sex with his god-like terror, may be the discursive key to this somber and somewhat enigmatic tale.