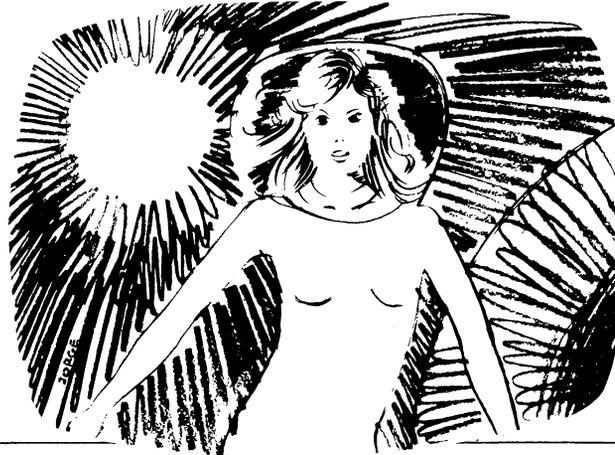


L'Euguélonne

Louky Bersianik



Few writings have had as much impact in Quebec in recent years as *L'Euguélonne* by Louky Bersianik. It has aroused controversy; it has its devotees and its decriers, but it is compulsory reading for anyone interested in the women's movement, Quebec literature, linguistic experimentation.

The book is a triptych and Louky Bersianik the chronicler of the adventures of L'Euguélonne, a goddess from outer space. The first section opens with her arrival on Earth, complete with camera-flashing journalists, and recounts her previous journeys. The second describes and denounces the conditions she meets on our planet. The third, which includes a condemnation of St. Siegfried (Freud), is essentially a political discourse intended to modify the private and public relationships between the sexes and between humans and nature. At the end, L'Euguélonne departs, having been unable to find the male of her species.

This vast fresco comes to us as a sort of anti-Bible, written in chapter and verse, and acquires in this manner the authority of a voice speaking across the aeons of time. It is also what one must call in English, for better or for worse, science fiction. The French also refer to science fiction as 'le roman d'anticipation', and that is probably a more accurate description. This literary genre, now in considerable use by feminists in the United States, is a practical tool in the hands of women writers, since it allows them to sidestep the problem of trying to imagine or depict truly liberated women in the present context by projecting into the future or the elsewhere.

Bersianik is interested in the Word (back to the Bible), and she has, in this work, sought out in many disciplines all the stereotypes, all the linguistic sexism which pervades them and has created a counter-discourse with which to oppose them. With irony, with humour, with passion, she subverts the language and traditions of Power (male), and the lucid quality of her text is part and parcel of the revolution which she proposes.

The short extract in translation which we offer here as an appetizer to the rest of the book contains the legend of the Parameciae, and we have no doubt that women will recognize our forsaken cry and the meaning of the allegory.

Book Two

THE MASSACRED PARAMECIAE

"In terms of individual accomplishments, no cell of any living organism, even of the human, can be compared to a paramecium. (. . .) 'What am I capable of? -Everything!' this ciliated cell seems to be saying."¹

¹ translated from Max de Ceccaty, *La Vie, de la cellule à l'homme*.

'She is all yours for 17 francs'.

CHAPTER ONE OUR-LADY-WITHOUT-THE-WALLS

Thus spoke Euguélonne, in this present era of our Prehistory: 169. Following the footsteps of Men, I came upon a place where it was impossible to go further. Except by climbing over a high thick wall.

The idea of climbing the wall, however, would never occur to anyone. The atmosphere there was morbid and nauseating. Any sensible person would have fled at once. But, said Euguélonne, driven by curiosity, I moved closer, wanting to discover what was beyond the wall. It could not be an ordinary garbage dump; it was too inaccessible.

170. Looking closely, I made out the following inscription on the weathered stone:

*Passer-by, go no further
On the other side is
Our-Lady-Without-the-Walls
A place impure and evil
There is beyond the wall*

* . . . she will bring the good news of the end of a certain form of slavery on earth.

*An ancient and extinct volcano
It is a stamp of steel
Twixt earth and ether and time
Whence, across the centuries,
There crepitates
THE FORSAKEN CRY*

This last line was puzzling, said Euguélonne, since, no matter how hard I listened, I could hear only absolute silence.

II THE FORSAKEN CRY

171. I was standing there, thinking about the inscription, when suddenly I thought I heard buzzing in my ears.

It's the strain of being here in this insufferable atmosphere, I said to myself. So I decided to leave that abhorrent place. I turned back and started walking away. But the buzzing grew louder and louder.

I quickened my pace. The buzzing pierced through me, invading my every pore, cutting a road into the deafness of my flesh. It possessed me, transforming me into one Enormous Ear, capable of absorbing all the noises of the world, the unheard-of world perfectly concealed beyond the wall.

172. I stopped, out of breath. And then I heard *It*, the unadulterated scream. It seemed never-ending. Screamed out in one single breath, endless, with no relief or rest.

Then, words took shape within the cry, distinct, monotone words formed of shrill, intolerable agony.

173. *I have been crying, crying, crying, out into a desert. I am crying out into a desert. Is it a desert? Or is my voice emitting ultrasounds inaudible to those of my kind? Or, like a bat with defective radar, have I been colliding with things and people, inspiring fear and loathing?*

I see one who contemptuously holds out his garbage to me, another who indifferently dusts his couch.

I have cried and cried and cried and cried. Do you hear me now? Does anybody hear me?

174. *The great march has begun. Like an inextinguishable forest fire.*

I am marching, an impatient and implacable flame. And I enkindle impatient, implacable flames in my wake.

The great march has begun, burning its way towards the cities, towards Men. For I am not a Man. I am a MASSACRED PARAMECIA.

III THE MARCH OF THE PARAMECIAE

Fire does not choose its victims, continued the forsaken cry. Fire does not choose its victims when it is on the march. It makes no distinction between dead wood and living wood. It makes no distinction between that which is open and that which is closed. No one ever thinks of putting a padlock on their possessions to protect them from fire.

The Parameciae who have been massacred for centuries are on the march towards Men.

175. *The Massacred Parameciae are enflamed and they are gaining ground. They come in waves, waves of the past and waves of the present. They come in waves of billions, waves*

of millions, waves of thousands, waves of hundreds, they come in waves of tens, they come in waves of Ones. You can count them. You can name them, because each was given a name in her childhood.

176. *And the very first Paramecia, massacred in the night of time, is there, close by. She, the very first One, is no less threatening than Number One and One-Half Billion of the current wave.*

To each new generation, the preceding wave adds itself. You can count them. They number in the billions. They are marching towards Men. And when they arrive, they may turn away from Men for good. For they are not Men. They are Massacred Parameciae.

IV THE MURDER WEAPON

177. *They are coming out of the night of time. They are awakening. They suddenly remember that they have been massacred.*

178. *Someone who has been murdered does not know that he has been murdered, because death also brings that oblivion. Consequently he does not know who murdered him. He does not know how his murderer went about it. He does not know why. For he has always said to himself: 'Why would anyone murder me?' Even the worst of scoundrels will never believe that someone would go as far as murder to punish him.*

But whatever the weapon that took her life, this weapon kindled a spark of light in her. Her awakening has been smouldering over the centuries. One day this light becomes so blinding that the dazzled victim comes back to life. And from that moment on she knows. She knows, and blindly seeks her revenge.

179. *Hatred, frustration, swelling rage, the agony of feeling her brain always ready to explode under an injunction without appeal, the impossibility of freely wandering the roads of life, of knocking on the doors she chooses — these are the centuries-long experiences of the victims of the Massacre, experiences which are now driving them to act. For they are finally awakening. And now they know. They are on the march. They are on the march towards the Men who murdered them, even if it was sometimes done in all innocence.*

These were the words, said Euguélonne, that seared through the interminable forsaken cry that I heard on your planet, near the place called Our-Lady-Without-the-Walls.

V THE LEGEND OF THE PARAMECIAE

180. Back in the city, said Euguélonne, I went to see Exile. Tell me about the Massacre of the Parameciae, I said to her. In the beginning were the Parameciae, said Exile. They were single-celled organisms, extremely creative and infinitely variable, great inventors of new systems; they were efficient researchers enlisted by nature to see just how far is too far for a cell to go.

But the Great Provider and Lord Protector of the Evolution of the Species, who wanted to go on to the Metazoan stage, thought the Parameciae were decidedly too individualistic and, judging by the way they were going, they would never accept community life. That, at least, was *his* conclusion which he stuck to with unshakeable conviction—the obvious idea of consulting the interested parties having never occurred to him.

So the Great Provider who was nothing more than a Paramecia in disguise decided to act. He chose the least evolved of the species, one half to be exact, and endowed them each with a stick, saying: 'Go and annihilate the potential of that half of your species who have not been granted the power of the Stick. This Stick gives you the power to club, brutalize, bludgeon, smash, demolish, destroy, command, dominate, rule, and reign as lords and masters, and from all these heinous crimes you will derive infinite glory'.

The Investiture of the Sticks was immediately followed by the Investiture of Brains, or rather of what served as a brain, that is, a highly refined infrastructure.

The latter ceremony did not involve the distribution of brains, but rather their extraction from the second half of the Parameciae. These were presented to the Stick-bearing Parameciae who in no time at all reduced them to kiddy-fodder for the future.

Throughout the Massacre, the defenceless Parameciae cried out: 'We were willing to assume the evolution of the Species, but not at this price, not at this price!'

Later on this massacre of the Parameciae brains, which took place in the night of time, would be incorrectly referred to as the castration of half the species.

181. Then the Great Provider pronounced his curse: 'You are henceforth Providers,' he said to the Stick-wielding Parameciae, 'and you will use your Stick to command obedience'.

And to the others he said: 'You will revert to the primitive stage of insignificant Amoebae, pseudopodia will replace your intricate organs of locomotion, and you will be forced to see to the evolution and perpetuation of the Species. The brilliant intelligence that used to be yours will still be there at birth, but you will be forced to become the Parasites of those who hold the right end of the stick and who, having once succeeded in decerebrating you, will repeat this deed day after day and century after century, until the last of the species you bring forth is extinct. Never forget: *Power grows out of the end of a Stick.*'

182. Following the Massacre, all the Parameciae went on being born Parameciae but, living under the constant threat of the Stick, half of them soon became Amoeba-like. The other half, however, while continuing to pursue their individual goals,

grouped together and took the form of *flagellated cells* which, they say, are the roots of the human tree. The whole burden and responsibility of reproduction was imposed on the Massacred Parameciae, leaving the Stick-holders all the leisure they needed to perfect—more or less successfully—their own kind, the so-called 'Bastinados'.

183. You may find this story a bit simplistic, but it's only a legend, concluded Exile. And, like all legends, it erects an impassable wall between the good and the bad, even at the microscopic level.

—It reminds me of what I learned in the Forest of the Squonks about the officer's swagger stick, said Euguélonne.

—It could be, said Exile mischievously, that these two stories have the same origin. The evolution of the species which led to Man was perhaps paralleled by the evolution of the Parameciae's Stick into officer's swagger stick.

—There are, however, said Euguélonne, two things that puzzle me. First of all, why did the stick-bearing Parameciae blindly obey the Great Provider and mercilessly massacre their sisters?

—Oh yes, said Exile, I forgot to mention that only a small number of the Parameciae obeyed. The others categorically refused and abstained from all acts of violence.

—And what happened to them? Were they punished?

—First of all, they were relieved of their sticks and, in some cases, of their brains as well. But, having had a taste of the right end of the stick, most of them thought themselves authorized to lord it over those who never had the Stick.

184. —The second thing that puzzles me, said Euguélonne, is that I really did hear the cries of the Massacred Parameciae coming from Our—Lady—Without—the—Walls. The interminable cry is not a legend. And also why did they say that it was Men who murdered them?

Exile left Euguélonne's last question unanswered.

Translation by W.I.T.C.H., the feminist translation workshop of the Simone de Beauvoir Institute. Wendy Johnston, Tima Newman, Howard Scott, Maureen Sullivan.

