

# The chariot of Thespis\*

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## The journey topos

A symbolic leitmotif appears throughout the film adaptation (1943) of Théophile Gautier's famous novel *Captain Fracasse* (*Le Capitaine Fracasse*, 1863), directed by Abel Gance. To the dramatic accompaniment of music by Arthur Honegger, a sequence repeats in which a wheel turns on a vehicle, which is somewhat theatrically and exaltedly referred to in the novel as the "Chariot of Thespis". What is important and essential to the plot here is that this metaphorical association has been used in modern times to designate any band of strolling players, and equally importantly within this narrative, this is also an actual vehicle travelling from Gascony to Paris in the 17th century in the reign of Louis XIII.

The vehicle is both the figurative Chariot of Thespis and an actual means of transport with all the actors' property – a wagon loaded with props, sets and costumes. First it is drawn by slow oxen, then by four horses, then by a single half-dead horse and finally by two strong draught horses, which are well equipped, as the novel stresses, and fine beasts. This detailed list may appear pedantic, but by quoting it I hope to indicate the finely-tuned semantic sophistication behind the actors' journey in Gautier's novel.

Of course, the changing draught animals clearly illustrate the actors' living reality and the Wheel of Fortune, which perhaps in their case turns a lit-

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\* The study is part of a grant project Czech Science Foundation 13–29985S.

tle too quickly. The relentless cycle of hope – happiness – decline – death – rebirth often moves the story forward towards naturalistic scenes. However, these disrupt the effects of what Gautier in his study of Baudelaire calls “un rayon à la Rembrandt” or “un trait de grandesse à la Velasquez” in the context of “la difformité sordide” (Gautier 1868: 22). And in accordance with the principle behind these poetics, a kind of double exposure of the landscape is made, along with a kind of double image of the being or event concerned. In brief, the cruelty of individual fates and stories framed or affected by the landscape is imbued with poetry.

The actors’ wagon enters this landscape with a different role to its usual function as a means of transport and a dwelling, or to that of its figurative meanings: a) it “is” the actor’s troop; b) it is a “vehicle” for the story in the sense that for some time it “carries” it through space-time. The wagon is closely associated with the journey, not only with its grimness during winter travels, but above all with the symbolism, for which the vehicle becomes the core. Bakhtin’s journey chronotope as a higher structural level is of exceptional import here, facilitating and staging meetings, confrontations and adventures, and showing the direction, the destination and effort; but then the vehicle itself on the road is also highlighted.

Ce chariot poursuivant son voyage symbolisait la vie, qui avance toujours sans s’inquiéter de ceux qui ne peuvent suivre et restent mourants ou morts dans les fossés.  
(Gautier 1922: 223)

This figurative characterization at a specific place in the plot, amidst bitter moments of travelling, both summarizes retrospectively and anticipates manifestations of the remorseless energy of life and times of courage and death.

Episodes co-determined by three sujet components, the vehicle proceeding with difficulty with all its aforementioned meanings and functions (people/actors, transport, symbol), the journey and the environment/landscape, indicating the chief romanesque genres in the structure of *Captain Fracasse*. Events on the journey, extreme situations and space-time all have a share in the atmosphere of confessions, decisions and death. It is in just such an environment that the central elements of the plot are outlined, while the descriptive sections, which we might refer to as aesthetic microstructures, are built up within this framework.

### **Intertextuality and the genre ground plan**

Because in the next few comments the multi-layered nature of the novel conditioned by its intertextuality should always be borne in mind, we firstly highlight two of these levels:

The frequently occurring word “adventure” (*l’aventure*) recalls a key strand in the novel, even though the old epic tradition of the Arthurian cycle, where this motif word is one of the most prominent, is brought to mind no less. Adventure fills the lives of King Arthur’s knights, wandering around and seeking it out, wherever it may emerge. Empirically, their quest is linear (apart from the more magical adventures, when cyclic time takes over, and providing we do not take into account the vertical initiation dimension of the quest), as seen in the direct trip made by the central character Captain Fracasse to Paris. The reader of Arthurian tales is overwhelmed by the number of journeys that the knights have to make, and the countries that they have to go through. These are literally expeditions in search of adventure – ritualized expeditions, often associated with a road of trials. The guiding principle of the Round Table heroes is: If the adventures, dangers and worldly tests in which valour and devotion to the knightly code alone prove themselves do not come to us, then we will go out to seek them. – Without the actors’ crowds, i.e. without the fateful confrontation and the external impulses to stimulate desire and to drag him out of lethargy, and likewise without the courage to leave his dilapidated little chateau, the parallel of the enchanted palace, Gautier’s chief protagonist, the youthful and impecunious Baron de Sigognac, would have been unable to enter the novel of his life.

A second strand – sometimes a stratum that maintains a distance from the heroic epic, and then again sometimes a complementary element inciting adventurousness – is the genre of the actors’/theatrical novel. This level is inspired by some content structures from the well-known *Le Roman comique* (1651–1657) by Paul Scarron. The beginning of the wanderings, i.e. the story about a nobleman who sets out from his “Castle Misery” (“Le Château de la Misère”) with a band of strolling players into the world immediately recalls the fickleness and poverty of the acting profession, which will all be part and parcel of the journey. Likewise, the farcical elements will be strongly and repeatedly highlighted in the stories, as will the multi-level masquerading games (with make-up), the disguises and the disturbing illusoriness, constantly referring to the theatricality of the novel, the actors and the acting.

In addition to the mimetically presented performances, the narrative also includes theatrical scenes, discourses (courteous, swashbuckling and libertine) and sets, both with a comic slant and with serious diction.

The characters' speech is often exalted, allegorical and full of similes. In some cases this theatricality is reflected even in their civilian speech, which is distinctive both for its rather poetic nature and for its comically conspicuous thespian rhetoric, its exclusivity inappropriate to the situation and its "actorliness" in any situation. The actor Blazius, usually referred to as Pedant in accordance with his role, says: "[Ces] paroles débitées avec l'emphase grotesque qui lui était habituelle et qu'il transportait de ses rôles dans la vie ordinaire" (ibid.: 142) Theatrical discourse uttered for whatever reason, e.g. awareness of difference, fusion with the role or posturizing, distinguishes the actors from the other characters with the language of other worlds, which also occasionally merges with a reflection of reality, i.e. with some kind of mastery of it. However, this universe is also associated with clichés, stereotypes and minor roles. The elevated heights of art are beset by ham acting, though even that brings with it likeable signs of humanity. In this sense the stage is also an image of the world, as highlighted in the novel, which plays with the mirror connection between life and the theatre (cf. Hrbata 2013).

Pedant formulates a maxim regarding the borrowed nature of the actor's existence: the actors are shadows of human life. Indeed they cannot be the individuals they represent, but they can at least appear that way and thus exert a considerable power from the stage, particularly with regard to fashion and behaviour. The strength of this illusion lies in a combination of clothing, speech and attitudes. Because the novel about actors and acting is also a story of disguises and masks of various kinds, both theatrical and metaphorical, the adventures and love affairs also involve the question of being (essence) and imitation (simulacra), with a wittily serious or refreshingly grotesque (entertaining) slant, without the narrative going over into moralizing tones.

Ambiguity in the novel is all part of the actors' *modus vivendi*; it primarily emerges from the theatricality of the actors' lives, as the roles and masks frequently grow onto them. The characters of *Captain Fracasse*, primarily just performing under their theatrical character names even long to become their own mask. They identify in their appearance and conduct with roles at the boundaries of absurdity or tragedy, as demonstrated by the efforts made

by the lover Leander, and at the opposite extreme, there are the tragicomic endeavours made by the representative of the grotesque Matamore:

[...] grimaces de matamore étaient devenues, à la longue, sa physionomie habituelle, et, sorti de la coulisse, il marchait fendu comme un compas, la tête rejetée en arrière, le poing sur la hanche et la main à la coquille de l'épée. (Gautier 1922: 49)

An even more significant expression of ambiguity among the actors – because in the historicizing novel discourse it is a sign of existence – seems to be the coincidence between popularity and contempt, i.e. the contiguity between love and beating. The actors are welcomed and admired (as providers of entertainment and physically attractive mediators and creators of other worlds), persecuted and excommunicated.

The tragicomic parallel to the actors is personified by a couple of highway robbers, a man and a girl, recurrent figures associated with the chief protagonists. Here the actors have to face other actors, because the robbers' trap consists in the fact that their "troop" is represented (played) by suitably deployed, threateningly masked and armed strawmen, which in the twilight make credible substitutes. For a moment the theatrical illusion is successful, as it is brought about by the combined effect of the costumes, the poses, the props and the lighting, before this bizarre scene collapses in the attack on the non-existent actors. This confrontation turns into a parody of an armed struggle, i.e. with its covert theatricality, its feints directed as theatrical performances, the obviously theatrical showpieces, when the robber-actors take off their masks and admit their difficult lot, which is actually to some extent that of an actor.<sup>1</sup> This encounter is not quite a true event from the kind of swashbuckling novel known as *de cape et d'épée*<sup>2</sup> (although it is identical to the grotesque *extempores* of its romantic plots). The robbers are also actors in their own way, with their masks and simulacra, as if they came

1 "Hélas! répondit Agostin, je n'ai pas le choix d'une autre, et suis plus à plaindre que vous ne pensez; il ne reste plus que moi de ma troupe aussi bien composée naguère que la vôtre; le bourreau m'a pris les premiers, seconds et troisièmes rôles; il faut que je joue tout seul ma pièce sur le théâtre du grand chemin, affectant des voix diverses, habillant des manequins pour faire croire que je suis soutenu par une bande nombreuse" (Gautier 1922: 12).

2 I.e. a thrilling "popular" historical adventure.

from the picturesque underworld of Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831). The adventure begins as something of a farce.

Actors appreciate actors, and so in transparent *sujet* sequences, as it were, the sophisticated and increasingly profound text work is suddenly revealed. This is indicated by parallelisms, along with thematic orchestration, i.e. accompanied by supplementary narrative structures, as well as the self-reflexiveness of this “histrionic” novel with numerous intertextual elements. Not infrequently does the kinship of the protagonists' tales bring to mind stories from novels or the stage. At the end of the half comic skirmish the chief protagonist Isabela turns to Signognac and says:

Vous vous êtes conduit comme un héros de roman. (ibid.: 122)

He answers:

Ce péril était bien peu de chose, à peine une algarade [...] pour vous protéger je fendrais des géants du crâne à la ceinture, je mettrais en déroute tout un ost de Sarrasins, je combattrais parmi des tourbillons de flamme et de fumée des orques, des endriagues et des dragons, je traverserais des forêts magiques, pleines d'enchantements, je descendrais aux enfers comme Énéas et sans rameau d'or. Aux rayons de vos beaux yeux tout me deviendrait facile, car votre présence ou votre pensée seulement m'infuse quelque chose de surhumain. (ibid.: 123)

The narrator, referring to Longinus, describes this discourse as “asiatique-ment hyperbolique, mais elle était sincère” (ibid.). People are prone to go overboard with the language of love. However, this sincerely meant pompous declaration does not only come under the psychology and lexicon (of historical codes and courtly rhetoric) of lovelorn nobles, for it seemingly referred to Baron Sigognac's next role in his story, the adopted acting role (mask) of the swashbuckling Captain Fracasse. Nonetheless, this omen relates to the bombastic, swaggering side of his theatrical performance, not to the dauntlessness, courage, vigour and forthrightness of the Gascon cadets, as they have been created by legends and literature, in connection with their model, their historical patron Henry of Navarre, King Henry IV, whose supposed summons (“or order of the day”) before the Battle of Ivry, referring

to the “white plume” (*le panache blanc*) on his helmet, the white feathers as a symbol of courage, could be their slogan: “Si vous perdez vos cornettes, ralliez-vous à mon panache blanc: vous le trouverez sur le chemin de la gloire et de l’honneur”. Let us recall here that the final words of the theatrical Cyrano de Bergerac are: “Quelque chose que sans un pli, sans une tache, / j’emporte malgré vous, / et c’est [...] / *Mon panache*”; highlighted by ZH).

Using Gérard Genette’s terminology (1982), Sigognac’s story could be a *mezotext* in view of the story of d’Artagnan (*the hypotext*) and Cyrano (*the hypertext*). Disregarding for now the fact that they are essentially related by their poetics and the idealism of romanticism, the mirroring or linkage clearly emerges in the context of the shared signs of swashbuckling Gasconades, which are characteristic of it at various levels and operating in tandem with *mise en abyme* metaphors and figures. Sigognac ultimately embodies the figure of Captain Fracasse-Matamore; in Rostand’s *comédie héroïque*, a melange of romantic histrionic heroism and comic scenes apparently from *commedia dell’arte*, heroic grandeur (valour, talent, devotion and noble-mindedness) and grotesquerie (physical ugliness), Cyrano de Bergerac selflessly represents/plays his lifeless rival in love. Along with their swaggering in several senses of the word (boastfulness and courage), the Gascon cadets are also under the influence of the Don Quixote tradition. As soon as D’Artagnan appears for the first time in Dumas’s novel, the narrator is prompted to mention his courage, poverty and quixotic tendency to confuse wishes for reality. Sigognac’s cited tirade against Isabela intertextually (i.e. as a quote) includes Cervantes’ rhetoric from the resourceful knight, immediately afterwards supported by specific references to Amadis of Gaul and other protagonists from the knightly novels out of which Don Quixote created his imaginary world. And ultimately impoverished and pitiful, with Don Quixote’s armour and d’Artagnan’s old nag, he sallies forth to fight for his ideals, or at least for those from novels.

### Descriptions and evocations

The prologue to the winter scene is an episode presenting the troop of actors’ performances at the rich country nobleman’s chateau. The chapter “Chez monsieur le marquis” is outstanding for its vivid visualizations. These descriptions evoke, or to be more precise they verbally reconstruct, space in accordance with several models, to which the architecture in the text

is compared (the palaces on the Place Royale in Paris, or the geometrical French garden, i.e. at the time of the story, the landscape gardening “selon la dernière mode” – these clear extratextual references offer the reader a way to visualize and concretize), or form a space with certain objects based on three components: materials, colours and forms. However, these *descriptive pauses* (as Genette calls them, 1972), with their own specific artistic intentions, cannot be separated from the narrative or the ideas. As required by Flaubert, the description has a diegetic function. Apart from specific local moments, when the description more or less comprises autonomous images or “vivid scenes” (*hypotyposes*), the descriptive systems affect the narrative, or in some cases are coordinated with them (Ippolito 2009). With its magnificent and sophisticated appearance the La Bruyère chateau presents the architectural and decorative opposite of the Sigognac chateau, depicted at the beginning of the novel in no less detail, but in a state of total dilapidation and abandonment. The narrator pays both chateaux exceptional attention, because it is actually before the impoverished, shamefaced baron amongst the similarly astonished and impoverished actors – and likewise before the reader – that the sensory contrast between opulence and poverty, good fortune and a grim fate are meant to emerge, in parallels which anthropomorphize and zoomorphize both contrasting chateaux, with the result that the opposite is even presented physiognomically.<sup>3</sup>

A detailed descriptive inspection of the chateau halls and rooms,<sup>4</sup> where the actors are allocated as the lord of the chateau attentively directs, virtually in accordance with their roles and appearances (“Isabelle eut la chambre bleue, cette couleur seyant aux blondes”; Gautier 1922: 136–137) abounds in details, in which the precise evocation (creation) of the environment merges

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3 “Ce château frais, neuf, pimpant, blanc et vermeil comme les joues d’une jeune fille, adorné de toutes recherches et magnificences, faisait une satire involontairement cruelle du pauvre manoir délabré, effondré, tombant en ruine au milieu du silence et de l’oubli, nid à rats, perchoir de hiboux, hospice d’araignées, près de s’écrouler sur son maître désastreux qui l’avait quitté au dernier moment, pour ne pas être écrasé sous sa chute. Toutes les années d’ennui et de misère que Sigognac y avait passées défilèrent devant ses yeux, les cheveux souillés de cendre, couvertes de livrées grises, les bras ballants, dans une attitude de désespérance profonde et la bouche contractée par le rictus du bâillement. Sans le jalouser, il ne pouvait s’empêcher de trouver le marquis bien heureux” (Gautier 1922: 131–132).

4 The authorial narrator whimsically identifies with the novelist, who possesses the ring of Gyges.

in the spirit of the aforementioned contrasting and symbolic representation with the careful composition of the (designatory) verbal decorations, which in Gautier's case always denote something: the autonomy and disinterestedness of art and beauty. This conception is based on two sources. From the standpoint of historical hermeneutics it would be justified to consider the author's association with the aesthetics of the ideal (Winckelmann, Schiller, Kant – not to mention Plato). If we keep to the programme declarations made by the author's characters, this one would be of fundamental importance: “Trois choses me plaisent: l'or, le marbre et la pourpre, éclat, solidité, couleur” (Gautier 1973: 226). This is indicated by the matching gold and red of Sigognac's room, where the fireplace stands out “en marbre sérancolin blanc et tacheté de rouge” (Gautier 1922: 138). This palatial decor matches the antiquity of the guest's nobility, which is not negated by his poverty, and it is also like a sign referring to his future status, i.e. the hero's prospects within the novel. Within this description, which lovingly and thoroughly presents the decorations in accordance with this aesthetic, Bohemia makes a sudden surprising appearance for us in the somewhat bizarre context of oriental grandeur:

Les murailles [...] étaient tapissées de cuir de Bohême gaufré de fleurs chimériques et de ramages extravagants découpant sur le fond de vernis d'or leurs corolles, rinceaux et feuilles enluminées de couleurs à reflets métalliques luisant comme du papillon. (ibid.: 137)

If self-reflection sometimes occurs within the narrative of *Captain Fracasse* as a corrective to the pathos and grandiloquence (romanesqueness) or as a manifestation of romantic irony, the narrator accompanying the reader very attentively around La Bruyère chateau must refer at one point very humorously – indeed in Sternesque fashion – to a certain limitation in his descriptive specialization, namely in the extensive listing, and challenges the readers to themselves fill in the “gaps of underdetermination”:

Il y avait la chambre jaune, la chambre rouge, la chambre verte [...] et telles autres appellations analogues qu'il vous plaira imaginer, car une énumération plus longue serait par trop fastidieuse et sentirait plutôt son tapissier que son écrivain. (ibid.: 136)

However, there are no further limitations in the artists' descriptions, as Gautier's art is basically moulded, in his admirer Henry James's words, by a passion for material detail, which the writer succeeds in bringing to life, illuminating and interpreting (Delvaille 1968: 104). Whenever Charles Baudelaire comments on his friend's poetry, he elevates this ability to the highest aesthetic level: he believes that Gautier enhances French poetry with a thousand details, which radiate light and plasticity. In particular the author innovates by using a principle that Baudelaire calls "la consolation par les arts, par tous les objets pittoresques qui réjouissent les yeux et amusent l'esprit" (Baudelaire 1859: 61). Gautier's "evocative sorcery" (*une espèce de sorcellerie évocatoire*) creates synaesthesia: "C'est alors que la couleur parle, comme une voix profonde et vibrante [...], que le parfum provoque la pensée et le souvenir correspondants..." (ibid.: 40). However much Baudelaire comes close to Gautier's creative work by means of his own poetics, this requires an idea of universal correlations and universal symbolism, and he aptly refers to the action in Gautier's description, which he says is associated with the flexible, undulating, flowery style. – Let us consider this characteristic to be a poetic definition of the process of considered selection, classification and combination of words into dynamic series.

The continuity of the structures of the theatrical novel in the environment of the chateau is particularly noteworthy during the performance by the troop of strolling players, in the reproduction / representation of the play *Captain Fanfaron's Bluster*. Besides, the noble chateau itself allows for several theatres, stages and scenes. Face to face with this luxury, the baron tries on his own poor, disintegrating wardrobe, which is just an extension of the "reality" of his disintegrating chateau. This "inspection mélancolique" (Gautier 1922: 139) crowns a series of confrontations, even though the readers, who share the young hero's painful impressions, are offered the hope that the plot of the novel will eventually reward "ce brave coeur blessé" (ibid.: 128). In the gloomy comparison of the grand interior and the contemptible personal property we again sense the anticipation of a happy ending, all the more so thanks to the fact that "[Un] charriot comique contient tout un monde" and "la friperie de l'humanité" (ibid.: 135) can with the aid of costumes and props create the illusion of magnificence and elegance with a makeshift arrangement. As he changes clothes at the chateau, the sad, wretched Sigognac turns into a magnificent nobleman and by appearance

a courtier, which ought to be his future rank in any case, as acting cannot be his entire career. However, he might accept the Chariot of Thespis as his temporary existence within the novel plot of *Captain Fracasse*: a plot full of love (being near his beloved), education (the school of life on the road to Paris, the centre of opportunities and the court), adventure and art – the strolling players are both a troop of actors expelled to the fringes of society and a community inspired by imagination and poetry.

The plays, disguises and appearances are no less associated with flirtation between the actors and noble society. In Gautier's poem "Watteau" the lyrical hero out on a sad walk in the twilight countryside comes across a park "dans le goût de Watteau" (Gautier 1932: 75) with slender elms, black yews and green hornbeams. This enchanting image awakens a yearning and sorrow within him. A similar park, an intertextual reminiscence of a poem (or its quotation) and in view of the time of the story a prolepsis of Rococo scenes, also appears in the novel as a place of frivolous entertainments, amorous dalliances and precious conversations, i.e. variations on theatrical subjects, codes and costumes. However, a tinge of sadness and melancholy is not a part or a consequence of the pleasures and gallant celebrations in *Captain Fracasse* as it is in Watteau's pictures. The adventure of the first lover in the group ends with a punishment which has more of an impact on the boastful Fanfarons than on the elegant Leanders. Instead of an assignation the chatelaine witnesses a cruel beating, which destroys the illusion of an irresistible lover, because in this way the impudent actor attempting to go beyond the limits of his inferior status is punished. The ambivalent situation again tends towards the farcical. Only the following winter stage of the journey, together with the memory of the successful performance and the merry existence in the chateau suggests a special analogy with Watteauesque nostalgia.

### **A Snowstorm and its consequences**

The favourable period is followed by *tempus fatalis, tempus mortis*. In the chapter entitled A Snowstorm and its Consequences (*Effet de neige*), the playful mood of the troop is followed by more serious tones in the autumnal landscape with the falling leaves. The vehicle comes to a crossroads with great symbolic potency. A crudely sculpted crucifixion of Christ with one hand fallen from his body anticipates confessions, as well as sufferings and dismal scenes. However, at this time the place is also distinctive for a certain am-

bivalence, because there is a postscript on previous chivalrous episodes. At this crossroads a noble equipage is awaiting and one of the actors leaves the group, albeit temporarily. Another member, the virtuous and humble *ingénue* Isabela, then tells Sigognac her story as the child of an acting family, in which two concepts conflict. One is anti-illusionary, because Isabela stresses that she was not brought to her calling by any disasters, insolvency or literally *aventures romanesques*: so it might appear that the discourse of this character contradicts the *romanesque* structure and the romantic plot. However, this immediately comes to the fore in the fairy-tale-like story of the actress's background, as her real father is a prominent aristocrat. This cliché involving noble roots and a distinguished father neutralizes the class differences between the baron and the actress and thus prepares the way for a happy dénouement.

This confession is followed by an ellipsis, as no notable events have taken place for some time in the story. “Nous sauterons donc quelques jours, et nous arriverons aux environs de Poitiers” (Gautier 1922: 201). However, what is of basic importance here is the information that during this ellipsis, the troop's income has gradually dwindled and hard times have ensued. Out of the original four horses only one poor old nag survives and the road has turned into a winter wasteland, a landscape of death. This is a highly characteristic and appropriate scene, synchronized with the actors' situation, which Fortune has turned her back on. The narrator recalls that the surrounding countryside has not helped to dissipate the gloom (“dissiper la mélancolie”), and this reference to the actual world in which one's disposition may be associated with the weather or the season of the year bolsters the text and augments the images of misery and sorrow.

Au premier plan se tordaient les squelettes convulsifs de quelques vieux ormes tourmentés, contournés, écimés, dont les branches noires aux filaments capricieux se détaillaient sur un ciel d'un gris-jaune très bas et gros de neige qui ne laissait filtrer qu'un jour livide; au second, s'étendaient des plaines dépouillées de culture, que bordaient près de l'horizon des collines pelées ou des lignes de bois roussâtres [...]. Au printemps, cette campagne, habillée de verdure, eût pu sembler agréable; mais, revêtue des grises livrées de l'hiver, elle ne présentait aux yeux que monotonie, pauvreté et tristesse. De temps et temps passait, hâve et déguenillé, un paysan

ou quelque vieille courbée sous un fagot de bois mort, qui, loin d'animer ce désert, en faisait au contraire ressortir la solitude. Les pies, sautillant sur la terre brune avec leur queue plantée dans leur croupion comme un éventail fermé, en parassaient les véritables habitantes. Elles jacassaient à l'aspect du chariot comme si elles se fussent communiqué leurs réflexions sur les comédiens et dansaient devant eux d'une façon dérisoire, en méchants oiseaux sans coeur qu'elles étaient, insensibles à la misère du pauvre monde.

(ibid.: 204)

The description and metaphorization of the natural elements, their forms and their colours, and the representation of their grim, impoverished lives are highlighted by the disfavour of space and time, which culminates in the snowstorm. The description also comes close to an empirical record of phenomena, i.e. the appearance of nature and the appropriate seasons, and in parallel it recalls the harsh circumstances of the actors' lives. However, in addition to this and in tandem with the subject matter of the theatrical novel, it does not cease setting and resetting the scene for crises and peripetias.

As the ominous atmosphere begins to thicken, there is the image of the miserable horse at the front of the group as it moves forward. This creature which enables the actors to travel for their livelihood, this "pitoyable et désastreux animal" (with ambivalence between repulsiveness and compassion), in contrast to which, according to the narrator, the horse ridden by Death in the Apocalypse looks a fine beast, inevitably augurs decline and demise in the winter landscape. Apart from the fact that it embodies the actors' destitution, the exhausted horse, this raw fact of the story, the impending impossibility of travelling any further, presents one of the most important descriptive "pauses" in Gautier's novel and in his entire poetic prose work, which the narrator himself signals, when he moves from the protruding ribs, the bones, the wounds and the tumours on its body and limbs to the horse's head with this: "Sa tête était tout un poème de mélancolie et de souffrance":

Derrière ses yeux se creusaient de profondes salières qu'aurait cru évidées au scalpel. Ses prunelles bleuâtres avaient le regard morne, résigné et pensif de la bête surmenée. L'insouciance des coups produite par l'inutilité de l'effort s'y lisait tristement, et le claquement de la lanière ne pouvait plus en tirer une étincelle de vie. Ses oreilles énervées, dont l'une avait le bout

fen du, pendaient piteusement de chaque côté du front et scandaient, par leur oscillation, le rythme inégal de la marche. Une mèche de la crinière, de blanche devenue jaune, entremêlait ses filaments à la têtère, dont le cuir avait usé les protubérances osseuses des joues mises en relief par la maigreur. Les cartilages des narines laissaient suinter l'eau d'une respiration pénible et les barres fatiguées faisaient la moue comme des lèvres maussades.

Sur son pelage blanc, truité de roux, la sueur avait tracé des filets pareils à ceux dont la pluie raye le plâtre des murailles, agglutiné sous le ventre des flocons de poil, délavé les membres inférieurs et fait avec la crotte un affreux ciment. Rien n'était plus lamentable à voir... (ibid.: 202–203)

The last sentence of this quotation expresses a deictic intention, an objectivizing visualization, embodying the extent and signs of dilapidation and decay. This hypotyposis transforms the description into an impressive, vivid scene, while the naturalistic tendency towards bare, decaying *tranches de vie* (sections of life, or here fading life) is balanced by the poetic structure. Its *least* important aspect is the similes and metaphors, because these might generally appear in any more or less literary or challenging description. The way a repulsive “object” is aestheticized is not just an explicit mixture of compassion and respect for the one who ultimately in the subsequent chapter (“Où le roman justifie son titre”) dies “il agonisait debout en brave cheval qu’il avait été” (ibid.: 235), who symbolizes the courage and cruelty of existence in connection with the strolling troop, as well as rhythmization and the intensification of the cadence of the description with alliterative suggestions.<sup>5</sup> – The description of the dying horse comes close to Baudelaire’s bizarre poetic images.

The spectral beast has its correlate in an actor, the most remarkable figure of Captain Fracasse, for whom the snowstorm was also *tempus mortis*. With his demise in the deserted landscape, Matamore,<sup>6</sup> a phenomenally gaunt actor

5 “Sa tête était toute un... [...] Derrière ses yeux se creusaient de profondes salières qu’aurait cru évidées au scalpel. Ses prunelles bleuâtres avaient le regard morne, résigné et pensif de la bête surmenée” (ibid.: 202).

6 From the Spanish *mata moros*, Moor killer, a comic figure from *commedia dell’arte*, one of the numerous forms of the protagonist in Plautus’s comedy *Miles gloriosus*, a braggartly but in reality a cowardly soldier.

due to the enhanced comic effect onstage, personifies the analogy between the actors' poverty and the cruel environment. In contrast to aspects of the ghost story that might have developed from this context or in such an atmosphere, however, these extreme moments present the grotesquerie of the situations and the rhetoric of the valiant actors, finding reasons for laughter "où d'autres eussent gémi comme veaux et pleuré comme vaches"; *ibid.*: 226) The extremely light Matamore fills his pockets with pebbles so he can proceed against the strong wind, while Blazius-Pedant comments in an ironically humorous way on the woeful contents of the food pouch and with comic comments in an exaltedly theatrical oration he apportions the leftovers just like "sur les radeaux dans les naufrages" (*ibid.*). The consequences of the snowstorm include traces of bravery and detachment, alongside elements of dark humour.

[...] et de temps en temps des flocons de neige secoués d'une branche tombaient pareils aux larmes d'argent des draps mortuaires, sur la noire tenture de l'ombre. C'était un spectacle plein de tristesse; un chien se mit à hurler au perdu comme pour donner une voix à la désolation du paysage et en exprimer les navrantes mélancolies. Parfois il semble que la nature, se lassant de son mutisme, confie ses peines secrètes aux plaintes du vent ou aux lamentations de quelque animal. (*ibid.*: 208–209)

The mounting indications of ruination climax in the howling of a large black dog sitting in the middle of the plain. This presentation of deathly phenomena overshadowing the entire landscape culminates in this image of a lone beast with no lack of infernal touches. It is in this cruel constellation that the actor Matamore meets his end, as his frozen mortal remains were seemingly a source of deathly grotesque adornment, because the actor's face retains the comic wrinkles imprinted on it by the constant grimaces of the character he embodied. The actor's mask becomes his death mask, and the horror is permeated by the comic "car c'est une misère du comédien, que chez lui le trépas ne puisse garder sa gravité" (*ibid.*: 211). In *Captain Fracasse*, paradoxes and oxymorons are dramatic and thus important figures, forming the basis for the plot behind the descriptions of threats, dangers, dying and death in the landscape of sepulchral silence, where the snow becomes the actor's premature shroud. Matamore's burial outside the cemetery, in close prox-

imity to the naturalistically and even hallucinatorily portrayed cattle burial ground, with similes referring to demons and fantastic horrors, is governed by two different hypotexts (or one pretext and one code): the frenetic aesthetics of shock, to which Gautier dedicated some of his work and the period discourse at the time of the novel, i.e. church laws prohibiting the burial of excommunicated actors in consecrated ground.<sup>7</sup>

If Sigognac also displays fearless behaviour here, as he disperses the aggressive, ignorant villagers who suspect the group of heresy and witchcraft, beating them with the flat of his sword, this his adventure, albeit dangerous, is still a rather incomplete, half-chivalrous half-simulacrum or harbinger of real (romanesque) adventures, when in defence of honour and love he clashes with outstanding duellists in a “swashbuckling” strand of the novel. The role within the plot of the pallid, dangerous landscape with its “black dots of ravens” is mainly to put pressure on people to show signs of courage in facing ill fortune, which for the actors then slowly begins to turn into good fortune. In a situation recalling the dance of death they suddenly obtain food in the form of a stray gander, and in the darkness of the snowy landscape without signs of habitation “une petite étoile rougeâtre se mit à scintiller au pied d’un coteau à une grande distance de la route” (ibid.: 237). Characteristically, at that time hope arises and a turnaround in the actors’ fortunes and the baron’s life looms ahead.

In conclusion, let us change the indicative sentence in the chapter title into a question, in order to summarize the effects of the landscape and its prominent co-presence in the plot: hence “A Snowstorm and its Consequences?” The location-prop increases the drama of the journey, and in itself, or it might be said of its own accord, helps to bring people closer together, to confess and to outline the secret sides of their life and origins, or in other words it helps to create the plot for a love story in line with romantic aesthetics. The arduous journey made by the Chariot of Thespis is accompanied by a historicizing discourse describing the social marginality and otherness, if

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7 The novel seems to be constantly overshadowed by the famed memento of Molière’s fate and that of his troop of actors. As is well known, Molière was one of Louis XIV’s favourites and one of the main authors of the royal entertainments. The king even became the godfather of Molière’s child. When Molière died, only the king’s power and intercession with the Archbishop of Paris allowed for the church burial of this “mere performer”, albeit at night and without ceremony.

not the outcast nature (to use a romantic category for a romantic narrative) of the actors, corroborating the theatrical strand of this novel. The circumstances of the journey giving rise to *tempus fatalis* – the drama of the double death, which opens up certain possibilities for the aesthetics of ugliness and the cruelty of life, both in association with grotesquerie (theatricality), and with poetic prose. The double death, which is mirrored by the select, moulded landscape, the stormy winter night in remote locations gives rise to ominous adventurous episodes, omens of danger and adventure in stories from a *roman de cape et d'épée*, in which the protagonists have to perform acts of bravery, and in which it is necessary to show the ethics and practice of courage. And ultimately, the death of the actor Matamore made it easier for the young Baron de Sigognac to make his crucial decision, i.e. to start something new – to create anew: to overcome his aristocratic pride, not to cause the actors difficulties and to temporarily assume the role of a comic braggart in their troop (a courageous man, a noble from an ancient family and at the same time, as it turns out, a talented actor is able to embody his own antipodes, in the spirit of Diderot's *Paradox of Acting*):

Je plie mon titre de baron et le mets au fond de mon portemanteau, comme un vêtement qui n'est plus de mise. Ne me le donnez plus. Nous verrons si, déguisé de la sorte, je serai reconnu par le malheur. Donc je succède à Matamore et prends pour nom de guerre: le capitaine Fracasse! (ibid.: 233)

This choice is also a choice of love and hope for success in life with a half-hidden identity, with a theatrical mask that can always be put on and taken off. The result of this knight-actor amalgam is a highly available hero. The chapter entitled “A snowstorm and its consequences” (and the associated, seemingly self-reflective chapter “The Novel Justifies its Name”) offers a well-composed set of sequences which open or (with several symbolic signs and plots) substantially anticipate the novel possibilities of *Captain Fracasse* and its genre, thematic and discursive potential.

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