

A LITTLE GIRL DREAMS OF TAKING THE VEIL

Synopsis

The opera is based on Dorothea Tanning's translation of Max Ernst's 1930 surrealist collage novel *Rêve d'une Petite Fille qui Voulut Entrer au Carmel*. Using Victorian penny novel visual motifs and captions as the basis for its construction, Ernst's book explores the non-rational but very real world of religious ecstasy and erotic desire. The opera interleaves the events of the little girl's dream with a surrealist narrative about the circumstances surrounding the dream including a rape, which the spontaneous child transforms into a fantastic prize: the opportunity for her first communion:

...at age seven and through the savagery of an ignoble individual she lost her virginity. It happened on the very day that first communion was refused her: she was too young, as her milk teeth proved. The individual, not content with having forced her, broke all her teeth with an incredible ferocity and by means of a large stone. The she came back and said to the Reverend Father Denis Dulac Dessale, while showing him her bloody mouth: "now I can take communion, I have no more milk teeth."

The dream itself has four stages, indicated by the novel's chapter headings: **The Tenebreuse**, **The Hair**, **The Knife**, and **The Celestial Bridegroom**.

In **The Tenebreuse**¹, the little girl's desire to enter the church and to fit into religious as well as other forms of conventional society is shown to be at odds with her spontaneous imagination and powerful erotic desires. In addition, her imagination of "fitting in" is so unlike what is expected of her that the conflict between her internal sensibility and exterior reality causes her to split in two. The opera version represents her as three, in fact: Spontanette, the dreamer, and Marceline-Marie, the dreamed or split Spontanette. Throughout the work, the dream demonstrates the precociousness of Marceline-Marie-Spontanette's "... intelligence, the beauty of her imagination, and her ardent heart" as it unmasks the repressive institutions of church and bourgeois society through the dreamer's powerful journey into the vast interior of her own psyche.

The Hair section of the dream opens to the interior of our heroine's erotic self-discovery. In it, she tries on erotic fantasies with the exploratory passion of a child lost in a grandmother's antique wardrobe. In this eroticized dream-realm, she invites furry animals and insects under her skirts, experiments with fantasies about priests and father-figures represented in her dream as lascivious male grotesques, and tries on associations of sexuality with flesh-eating tress and death, debacle, torture, natural elements, and ornate spectacle.

The autoerotic phantasms in **The Hair** segue into a vast and extraordinarily powerful interior realm in **The Knife**. Here she discovers an atavistic and tragic god (represented as an eagle in the novel), who identifies himself as "god without woman,"

¹ in this context a somber, obscure dance

and her own anger and aggressive powers in the context of patriarchal betrayal. In adopting and integrating what is typically considered masculine aggressivity she defeats the masculinist stereotypes instigated against powerful female figures such as crones or Pandoras who are claimed under a patriarchal mythos as the propagators of catastrophes, pestilences, rivers, war and pulmonary influenza" while she constructs a composite of forcefully enacted androgynous identities.

By the end of **The Knife**, Marceline-Marie-Spontanette has so thoroughly experienced and integrated her own emotional powers that the coming of the long awaited husband-god, in the last section, **The Celestial Bridegroom**, proves to be somewhat comical and anti-climactic. Indeed, she finds this god, who is represented as a series of split images and phony posturings, "in especially bad taste." The inadequate god-lover and the disaffected child mutually abandon each other in a disarrayed psychological state, mixed as it is with narcissism, tacit acknowledgments, and vain indifference in which an ambiguously redemptive anger is passed off from the god to the child, becoming the only certain connection between them.

Libretto

Academy of Science

The night will come when the Academy of Science itself will not disdain to cast its gaze on the sewers of the world. The night will come when, covered with all their jewels, the secondary skeletons that one calls scientists will ask themselves this question:

What do little girls dream of who want to take the veil?

On that night a violent storm will break against the doors of the Academy of Science and the water will roar in the pipes.

The water will remember the shameful year 1930, the year it would have liked to see all the cathedrals of the universe parade in far-too-short dresses. It will remember above all a certain night because...

On Good Friday night of the shameful year 1930 a child hardly sixteen years old dipped her two hands in a sewer, pricked her skin and with her blood traced these lines:

*To love the Holy Father and to dip one's hands in a sewer,
such is happiness for us, the children of Mary.*

From the Convent of the Visitation at Lyon where she was educated, she sent this phrase by carrier pigeon to her father, Christian-Socialist deputy in Paris, embraced him tenderly in her thoughts, went to bed and had a dream.

In the phrase from her letter quoted above it is easy enough to find the irresistible tendency that drew her toward the practice of obstinate devotion and theatrical sacrifice. It is easy to recognize there the precociousness of her beautiful intelligence, of her brilliant imagination, of her ardent heart.

The same powerful sentiment which from her eleventh year moved her to enlist under the banner of Saint Theresa of the Holy Child showed itself very early in her love for the study of Latin: she wrote rather playful phrases in which were revealed sometimes extreme delicacy, sometimes the sparkling verve of a Latin soul:

- Diligembimini gloriam inalliterabilem mundi fidelio.

- Benedictionem quasimodo feminam multipilem catafaltile astoriae.

At thirteen she called her body her somber prison:

"Hidden in the folds of my somber prison multicolored groups represent the various peoples of the world."

It seems to me that these phrases already show an unusual depth of mind and reveal the germs of the extraordinary dream which follows. It may be useful for its comprehension to say here that at age seven and through the savagery of an ignoble individual she lost her virginity. It happened on the very day that first communion was refused her: she was too young, as her milk teeth proved. The individual, not content with having forced her, broke all her teeth with an incredible ferocity and by means of a large stone. The she came back and said to the Reverend Father Denis Dulac Dessalé, while showing him her bloody mouth:

"Now I can take communion, I have no more milk teeth."

Though still a little girl too undeveloped to feel all her happiness, she sent nevertheless, again by carrier pigeon, this message to her father:

"Oh! I am so happy! How right you were to say that the day of one's first communion is the happiest day of a person's life. Laudate dominum de coelibus catalinena."

Her name was Marceline-Marie. This double first name is of prime importance in the evolution of the dream that follows. Due to the troubles provoked by the coupling of the two names of such a very different signification, we will see her slit herself up the middle of her back from the very beginning of the dream and wear appearances of two distinct but closely related persons. "Two sisters," she told herself in dreaming, and called one of them "Marceline" and the other "Marie," or "I" and "my sister." She only rarely succeeded in identifying herself in a definite way with one of them, and only at these happy moments did she see herself as she generally appeared, with her real age, her real sex, dressed and combed as usual.

Her "vocation," which she had wanted with all her heart since the day of her tooth-loss-virginity-loss first communion, came to her at the age of eleven during the benediction for a statue in bronze of the "Little Saint of Lisieux." She had remained motionless during the procession of the martyr's relics and during the sermon, that is, for two hours, her arms held out, a knife in her hand "to cut open the earth." Then, at the very moment that the seminarists were singing the "Hymn of the Ascension of the Children of Mary" she floated up from the ground, remained suspended in mid-air for some seconds, and cried out in a inspired and deliciously pure voice which was heard above the choir and the organs:

"Enter, dear knife, enter into the incubation chamber!

"The celestial bridegroom invites me to the feast!

"I sacrifice myself and I give myself!

"The earth is soft and white."

Stupified, the seminarists stopped their singing. "My child," replied the R. F. Denis Dulac Dessalé from the height of the altar, "glory to God and the Holy Church! You have, yes you have, a religious vocation. You must accept what has been offered you, but you are only eleven years old! How grateful you must be to Mary, your well-beloved mother and patron! It is she, never doubt, who has done everything - before, during and after."

Before, during and after.

That evening, perhaps by inadvertence, she broke a porcelain bowl, one of those which nightly serve the intimate needs of little girls, and was condemned to pay a fine. She paid the fine, but only after improvising a scene whereby the punishment inflicted by the Mother Superior was rendered ridiculous. She sang until midnight the "Wine of Consolations," a monotonous chant of penitence sung upon a single repeated note, and got up afterwards to bite the nails of all her sleeping companions. In the morning she stood by the door, at the moment when the bell rang for the little students to leave the dormitory, and holding out to each one a piece of the bowl transformed into a collection plate, and in a voice half sad, half mocking:

"I plead," she said, "the cause of right and justice against the adversaries of religion. One penny, I beg you, for the poor girl who broke her vocation. She, it is who did everything, before, during and after. The explosion of stars is not reserved for ticket-holders."

I The Tenebreuse

The father: "Your kiss seems adult, my child. Coming from God, it will go far. Go, my daughter, go ahead and count on me!"

Marceline-Marie: "My costume seems indecent, Papa, in the presence of Father Dulac. It's a delicate situation for a child of Mary..."

The R.F.: "Joy will be yours, my child!"

The father: "Let me weep and hold this hand condemned to vegetate in a cell. Listen to me, my child, baldness awaits you."

Marceline-Marie splits in two (Anguish and cries.) "I already find myself alone, too alone with myself, face to face with myself ... Jesus is here. It's he who crucifies me. Where are you? Papa! Papa! Tell me who am I: me or my sister ... or, down there, that indecent Amazon in her little private desert ... oh what joy! Here come the leech-charmers! Let's go. Let's dance the Tenebreuse until the beautiful dancers are completely exhausted!"

And after the Tenebreuse, at the Our Lady of Calvary ball, Marceline-Marie finds herself the center of attention.

Ah, now we've come to the bandage hour. Prayer: "We offer you, oh Lord, the bandage that we will make to honor the passion and death of your Son, our Lord ... Please give back their original purity to our enemies, to our dried-up parents, to dear Mama and good Papa, the spirit of resignation to our vixen aunt, and to all of us a theatrical death so that we may have the joy of joining you, oh adored Spouse, in this vessel which glides over the bloody floor. Who can know the ardor of my desires if not Your very high Highness, Your very august Humility, Your Obedience, and Your Royal Regularity." (End of Prayer.)

The Reverend Father Dulac Dessalé: "Rise, bride of Jesus, Follow me, my beauty, to the cracks in the walls, I who am called cockroach and kill-joy ..."

Marceline-Marie: "Who am I? I myself, my sister or this obscure beetle?" (Embarrassment.)

The priest, gone mad between two masses: "You're the one who infests ships, and crawls over the sleeping passengers at night. You give off a sweetish odor in my most intimate depths. You are ... (Religious silence.)"

The voice of the R. F. Denis Dulac Dessalé: "There is hell's door, open to all."

The cemetery of Lisieux's voice: "Sleep, sleep my child."

At this point Marceline-Marie awakens, examines her clothes, which she finds decent, and goes back to sleep.

II The Hair

Marceline-Marie, coming out of the anthropophagus tree: "All my hummingbirds have alibis, and a hundred profound virtues cover my body."

Pius XI: "Baldness awaits you, my child. At the first shot your hair will fly away with your teeth and nails. That serves only my very invisible vestments."

Marceline-Marie: "Crows and harpies, come with me under my white dress, take burning coals in your beaks and ... upsy-daisy! Upsy-Daisy!"

Marceline-Marie, coming out of the anthropophagus sea: "All my joys have alibis, and my body is covered with a hundred deep cracks ... come with me under my white slip, you very insensitive and well-mitered rats. And you, beetles, you who pick up the suburban garbage, follow me with your little bells and ... upsy-daisy! Upsy-Daisy! Come with me under my white dress, you terrible newspaper-reading grasshoppers. Widen your little eyes and ... upsy-daisy! Upsy-Daisy! keep quiet at my soul's door, dear little rabbits there under my white dress. Knock without coming in or going out ... you won't be poor anymore, head-shaven pigeons, under my white dress, in my columbarium. I'll bring you a dozen tons of sugar. But don't you touch my hair!"

The well-mitered pigeon: "Heaven is jealous of your hair, beloved child."

Marceline and Marie (in unison): "Crucifiers! Crucifiers!" And the hair floats away majestically. "But why does it wear the body of an athlete? Why is it smeared with a gelatinous spittle?"

The hair: "The better to strangle you, my child."

Marceline-Marie: "But why, hair, why are you everywhere?"

The hair: "The better to put you in your place, my child."

Marceline-Marie: "My place is at the feet of a merciful husband."

The hair: "To dream, to dress, to babble on sick Friday."

Marceline-Marie: "I see nothing, I feel nothing, I can't guess anything ... my body is growing soft and white ... thanks to the invisible fiancé."

Here now is the hour of wordless prayer. Prayer: "Dear Lord, fondle me as you knew so well how to do, during the unforgettable night when my soul was flooded with heavenly dew when we built a little purgatory in the incubation rooms; and a basket where, each time we did something virtuous, we dropped into it a grain of wheat for the making of the Host for our second communion." (End of the prayer.)

Marceline-Marie awakens and checks her clothes. After pulling down her nightgown which has slid up above her knees, she goes back to sleep. The dream continues.

III The Knife

The voice of the Reverend Father Dulac Dessalé: "Hey, little ones, where were you tomorrow?"

Marceline and Marie (with one voice): "We are twenty centuries old today, and a little more."

The voice of the Reverend Father: "Hey, little ones, this is the eve of the great day. Repent your sins and pick up the knife of supreme vicissitude, patience, zeal and charity."

Marceline-Marie: "I accept the knife offered me and will give strict orders to the animal passions."

The superior of the convent: "I saw myself in the form of a wolf. I sped through space with the rapidity of words."

The assistant mother superior: "Separated from everything I went with God into his vast interior."

Marceline and Marie (in one voice): "Through the fact and the wish, darling husband, you are the god of my heart and my lot for eternity."

The eagle: "Strike! Because I can hardly stand and I'm completely naked; I am God without woman."

Marceline-Marie: "My clothes, celestial husband, seem indecent."

The celestial husband: "Go wash my shirt with your flexible hands, in the Rhône River at dawn."

The R. F. Dulac Dessalé: "Hey, little ones, what are you doing there?"

Marceline and Marie (in one voice): "We are propagating catastrophes with our flexible hands."

The father, attached to lightning: "I must leave you, dear child. I'll will you my head and arms that have touched thunder."

Marceline-Marie: "Ah, but my hand, father, has touched clouds."

The voice of the father: "Your hand, my child, with its flexible flames, is twisting fires, catastrophes, pestilence, rivers, war and pulmonary influenza
"... there will be fresh meat for a long time."

The father: "I am learning everything from you, my child."

Marceline-Marie: "Here in my hand, father, is the knife of supreme vicissitude, prudence, zeal and charity. My companions have received orders not to cry out."

The superior of the convent: "Hit hard my child, I can hardly follow you and besides I'm completely naked."

"... with my hand, father, I've built a little work-altar."

The shipwrecked barbarians: "Come and admire the view from the top of the mast."

The first shipwrecked barbarian: "Hit me, my child, for you are the little saint and everything is inhuman."

The shipwrecked barbarians in chorus: "And the day exists nowhere."

Marceline and Marie (of one voice): "It seems to me the sky is falling into my heart ... walking is becoming painful. The earth is soft and white."

Marceline-Marie wakes up, a little dizzy. She corrects her nightie, which this time is really indecent, and goes back to sleep smiling. The dream continues.

The Celestial Bridegroom

Marceline and Marie (of one voice): "What a gentle awakening ... the celestial bridegroom has come down to earth!"

The celestial bridegroom: "Don't make any noise, my children, because I am the male belt. I am the metal that makes good for evil."

Marceline: "Where did you come from, celestial bridegroom?"

The celestial bridegroom: "I came from the name of a constellation. I've crossed five horizons. I'm not a ferocious beast. I'm the product of a very respected brain."

Marie: "Which is your cradle?"

The celestial fiancé: "My cradle is the word used in anger. I am the divine scalper's son. I am not a note to the reader.

Marceline: "You are in especially bad taste."

The celestial bridegroom: "Certainly, I always charge too much. I am the weed of the palaces, not the hovels. I'm going now and I leave you my anger."

Marie: "I see you are smiling."

The celestial fiancé: "I laugh because I'm the synonym of hunger. But I'm fairly digestible if you haven't eaten."

Marceline and Marie (of one voice): "We're happy and proud that you are."

The celestial bridegroom: "I am God without woman. I am the starved God. Even as an image I must die." He disappears into the Saint Martha Room.

The announcement to mother: "Don't be sad, mother. God betrayed me. I am His widow. I've become ageless and all my memories are smothered." The announcement to papa: "Don't be sad, papa. My heavenly bridegroom has gone crazy. But in my sanctuary, I keep the head and the arms that touched thunder."

"Monster! Do you realize I'm in love?!" - End of dream.