



En el castillo de Argol

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Un particular homenaje a la novela gótica

En el castillo de Argol es un particular homenaje que Julien Gracq rinde a la novela gótica y al Parsifal de Wagner, considerado por el autor como una indagación en la parte demoníaca que tiene todo mito de redención, en la doble naturaleza de todo salvador: "Seréis como dioses, conocedores del bien y del mal". Así, rodeado por tormentas, mares amenazadores y bosques siniestros, Albert, último heredero de una familia noble, llega a su casa solariega de Argol, en la inhóspita Bretaña. Su retiro espiritual se verá pronto roto por la llegada de Herminien, su mejor amigo, y de una extraña muchacha llamada Heide, poseedora de una belleza tal que "antes incluso de que fuera percibida, era sentida como única". El triángulo amoroso está formado y el escenario dispuesto para un intenso drama.

Reseñas:

«Julien Gracq es el mejor escritor francés vivo. Domina las letras francesas desde hace cincuenta años.»

Michel Tournier

En el castillo de Argol Details

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Jim says

He loves her,
But she loves him.
He loves somebody else,
You just can't win...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E0LAs...>

Albert, a young French intellectual, buys an old Gothic chateau near the coast of Brittany. He invites his close friend Herminien for a visit. Herminien writes to say that he is bringing along a friend, Heide. Albert, being the spoiled jealous type, is annoyed that his private time with Herminien will be intruded upon by an outsider. When they arrive, Heide turns out to be a beautiful young woman who almost immediately falls for Albert. And so, we have the makings of a doomed love triangle in a windswept chateau, or so it would seem.

Julien Gracq was enamored of Breton's novel, *Nadja*, and dedicated Chateau d'Argol to him. At first, we're able to easily follow events between our doomed lovers, but around the mid-point of the book, the surreal world of dreams takes over and what exactly is happening in the forest of Argol is obscured. Gracq's writing, however, seduces us into this dreamworld, to our aesthetic benefit.

Recommended to those who like to lose themselves in lush and seductive writing.

Nathan Jerpe says

A small, curious book about a man who goes to live in a castle in the forest. Ten chapters, only three characters; as far as novels go there's not much happening here.

I discovered, however, that if I approached this work as I would a set of paintings, I began to appreciate it more. Nature abounds - scenes of forests and thunder and the sea, and the internal, dreamlike deliberations of Albert and his guests are breathtaking. The design of the physical book is also remarkable, even minimalist, with a centerfold of a corpse in the back that I almost missed.

File this under prose poetry, fantasy in form if not in content. A bit of Hegelian philosophy, too, although that pretty much blew past me as I went.

Sean says

Julien Gracq's first novel is a paean to the early Gothic works of Poe, Walpole, and Radcliffe (freely admitted to by the author). Saturated in a heaviness that clings to the reader from the very first page, it tells

the tale of a wealthy young man named Albert who purchases an ancient estate surrounded by a forest of supernatural proportions. Soon after he moves in, his old friend and soul mate Herminien arrives for a visit accompanied by the mysterious woman Heide. What follows is a feverish blur of dreams, hallucinations, perambulations through the labyrinthine castle of Argol, and treacherous forays into the menacing forest. The tripartite inhabitation of the castle by Albert, Herminien, and Heide is initially fraught with the somewhat predictable complications of what one might expect from such a situation, and yet it is also at times much more complex than a standard love triangle. It is in fact arguable whether it is the nature of the three themselves that is at the root of their difficulties, or if they are mere pawns in a perverse game played by unseen forces at a level beyond both their control and comprehension. Either way, each of these three characters meets with both pleasure and pain on the vast grounds of Argol. Throughout the book, Gracq's prose spills over with lush descriptions of the wildness surrounding the estate (in particular Gracq seems to have a fixation on hypnotic forests; see also *A Balcony in the Forest*), and it is this relentless lushness that most indelibly characterizes the novel. Take, for example, this excerpt from the chapter entitled 'The Avenue':

One day, through the trees, they followed a wide green avenue covered by a vaulting of branches a hundred feet overhead, whose singular character, immediately apparent to the soul always on the alert for the perpetual snares of the forest, was due to the fact that while it ran through particularly hilly country and continually embraced each slightest sinuosity, yet the rigidity of its direction imposed itself upon the eye in the midst of all the natural undulations of the ground, and, straight in front of the traveller through the dark barrier of trees at the horizon, carved a luminous and sharply defined notch—suggesting to the mind, obsessed by the impenetrable wall of trees, a door opening into an entirely unknown country which, because of the besetting straightness of the avenue traced over hill and dale as by some wild caprice, by a will royally disdainful of all difficulties, seemed to confer a gift of capital attraction.

This particular edition, a Lapis Press reprint of the original New Directions English translation, is an oversized version with cover and endpapers taken from the Swiss painter Robert Zünd's work *Der Eichenwald* (The Oak Forest), interior foldout landscapes from a photograph by Jean Pritchard, and a photographic portrait of a 'corpse'—a self-portrait by Pierre Molinier. The illustrations, large type, and heavy paper with hand-sewn binding combine to present a storybook look and feel while reading, thus enhancing the overall Gothic spell woven by Gracq's trance-inducing sentences. I can't claim ownership of this fine edition, as it is from the library, but copies in excellent condition are currently hovering only in the \$20 range over at AbeBooks.

Jim says

This early (1938) novel by Julien Gracq is more a child of literary theory than of storytelling. There are three characters -- Albert, Herminien, and Heide -- holed up in an atmospheric castle near the Breton shore, surrounded by water, a dark forest, an eerie cemetery, and scads of atmosphere.

Lacking, however, is character. The death of Heide and Herminien (at least, I think it is Herminien) does not arouse any feeling because both they and Albert are more literary constructs than characters. There is only a single line of dialog -- the two words "Never again!" -- uttered either by Albert or Herminien, I'm not sure which.

On the plus side, *Château d'Argol* is written with a great deal of energy. The scenes are constantly shifting. Although I never saw any such Breton landscapes during my visit there, I was impressed by the constant

atmospherics.

A typical scene is the following:

A heavy idleness took possession of the inmates of the castle, and with rare and insignificant words they appeared persistently to avoid each other, to such an extent that even their chance meetings in the mazes of the winding corridors, filled with a faltering white light which seeped through the curtains of the rain as though diffused by the moisture ceaselessly streaming down the walls, engendered a visible malaise.

... as one would think it would!

Myles says

The good bits are really, *really* good: the gothic eloquence behind every action and description, the landscape and atmosphere, even the eroticism, are all written like a love-letter to language (in part, I'm sure, thanks to the translation). But the surrealism and dreamlike hazyness mid-way through turn this from a novel into something unexpectedly abstract and a little muddled. I'm sure someone with more patience and literary prowess would find more in this to enjoy than I did, but I found myself getting frustrated towards the end.

Simultaneously amazing and mediocre.

Alan says

I'm not really the right audience for this, a gothic romance which has all the tropes - including organ music in a ruined church, secret passages in the titular chateau, pining heroes, no dialogue, blood (but is it real?), knives and moons - and arcane language. However I was struck at several points by the beauty and accuracy of its descriptions, eg when the three go swimming:

They undressed among the graves. The sun burst through the mist , lighting the scene with its rays just as Heide in her dazzling nudity walked toward the sea with a step more mettlesome and light than that of a mare of the desert sands. In that shimmering landscape formed by those long watery reflections, in the omnipotent horizontality of those banks of mist, of those smooth flat waves, of those gliding rays of the sun, she suddenly startled the eye by the miracle of her verticality. All along the sun-devoured shore from which all shadows had fled, she set sublime reflections flowing. It seemed as though she were walking on the waters.

So I did enjoy it really. It was one of those lovely Pushkin Press books that you can slip in your pocket, so clear in type and sturdy in design.

Selma says

i read this in french, and though i am fluent and am used to heavy literary language (see an entire education

in the french school system) this was a challenge. the sentences are long, complex and require unflinching focus, and i had to keep my dictionary tab open on my phone at all times.

the prose is beautiful though: intense, rich, gothic, lyrical. the landscapes, castle and weather are lushly described (i'd visit argol and storrvan in a heartbeat), but i found the story lacking in pacing and cohesiveness. the characters of albert, herminien and heide were unfortunately uninteresting and rather two-dimensional.

3.5/5

Verónica Calvo says

Todo un clásico del género narrativa gótica.
Lleno de simbolismos, inquietante y pura narrativa.

El Divino Bambú says

La sintaxis lo es todo en este libro.

Denis says

A very mysterious and symbolic novel written by a master of the French language. A strange castle, two men and one woman, an intense atmosphere of intellectual stimulation and erotic attraction, and not one line of dialogue. It reminded me of some of the great European silent movies of the twenties, like L'Herbier's L'inhumaine (The Inhuman). The heroine could have been played by Garbo or Brigitte Helm. It may be a difficult and hermetic experience to some, but it is exceptionally intriguing, and the reader floats in a strange world he does not fully comprehend but cannot help be fascinated with.

Claire Menard says

Amour, désir, mort, érotisme autodestructeur... L'atmosphère gothique des couloirs du château dans lesquels on se perd au côté des trois personnages principaux et la sensation qu'un drame est en préparation nous tiennent en haleine pendant la lecture de ce court livre, premier d'une œuvre littéraire absolument exceptionnelle.

Kobe Bryant says

This book is like one of those electronic albums without any lyrics where you can't tell if it's good or not

Eadweard says

Very dense and descriptive prose, quite enjoyable.

"Albert now perceived that the abnormal disposition of the interior, which the appearance of the façade had suggested to his imagination, was not belied. The visitor first entered a lofty vaulted hall with Romanesque arches, and divided by three rows of pillars. The slanting rays of the sun coming through the low horizontal loopholes seen in the façade, and that the setting sun now lighted with long streaks of dancing golden dust, formed with the white pillars a luminous pattern separating the entire upper part of the vaulted ceiling, and their ever-changing and fantastic fluctuations prevented the eye from measuring its true height. No furniture was to be seen in this hall, but here and there piles of deep furred skins; and cushions, covered with Asiatic silken fabrics of an extravagant luxury, were piled against the naked walls and pillars with an air of negligent profusion, making one think of a night encampment of the Golden Horde in a white Byzantine cathedral. Out of this great entrance hall opened low and endlessly winding corridors interrupted by stairways and steep descents full of recesses and corners, which seemed to run like veins through the vast structure of the castle, presenting the appearance of a three-dimensional labyrinth."

John says

Now this maybe unfair. I did not finish this. For several years I have been circling this book, building up an assumption that it is 'my kind of thing'. Well, it's not. Every line sounds as if it is being declaimed with arch hand gestures by a terrible ham actor. It has good points: it's short. And pretty (like most Pushkin Press releases). But that's it.

Roger Brunyate says

Childe Albert to the Dark Tower Came

From the top of this mute sentinel of the sylvan solitudes, the eye of a watcher following the traveller's steps could not for an instant lose sight of him throughout all the twisting arabesques of the path, and if hate should be waiting ambushed in this tower, a furtive visitor would run the most imminent danger!

A sentence plucked at random from the opening of Julien Gracq's gothic-inspired novel, as his protagonist, a wealthy young man known only as Albert, approaches for the first time a property he has purchased sight unseen, a castle on a rocky fastness, rising high above the forests in a deserted area of Brittany. I cannot say which is more extraordinary, the book itself or this translation by Louise Varèse, who sustains an archaic style of overladen richness with the confidence of a juggler, heedless of the fact that one slip would make the plates and parasols fall down in a gale of mocking laughter. Gracq, whose first novel this was when published in 1938, of course does the same in his original (which I have also glanced at), but my French is not good enough to appreciate the linguistic legerdemain the way I can in English. I found myself reading avidly, not for the story or characters, but in utter amazement at the language, in willing surrender to

wherever Gracq would take me next.

The story has both the simplicity and mystery of Maurice Maeterlinck's symbolist drama *Pelleas et Melisande* (or the opera Debussy made of it). Three characters come to this isolated domain: the scholarly Albert, his bosom friend Herminien, and the beautiful Heide, who arrives as Herminien's companion but immediately falls in love with Albert. The palpable sexual tension is distilled to the point where it is almost indistinguishable from the equally strong overtones of homoeroticism. Again as in Maeterlinck, each successive setting seems like the stage of some intense drama, waiting only for the curtain to rise. There are the empty rooms of the castle, laced with light and strewn with furs, ready for the new actors to take up the long-abandoned play. There is the coast where rock, sand, and sun meet with the sea to dissolve the normal bonds of prudence. A deserted chapel in the woods, where an iron clock ticks out the unheeded minutes and a full organ stands in a crumbling clerestory for Herminien to thunder out a musical improvisation rivaling nature itself. A long avenue through the forest that takes an entire night to traverse, leading to a deserted circle on the heath where many such avenues meet. It is a world of dreams, where all is surreal, where even violation and death seem but stages in an existence beyond time.

I read the book because Philippe Claudel, the author of the magnificent *Brodeck*, cites Gracq as one of his favorite authors. To read him, though, is to plunge into a dense nexus of influences: Poe and the Gothic writers before him; Proust, for the heady perfume of his style; even a touch of the surreal near-pornography of Georges Bataille's *Story of the Eye*. I also thought of painting: Puvis de Chavannes, Gustave Moreau, and other Symbolists; Paul Gauguin, especially in his Breton period; and of course Salvador Dali. In a postscript to the reader, Gracq describes the novella as a demoniac version of Wagner's *Parsifal*, with its myth of the wounded Fisher King and the redeemer who must himself be redeemed. I half suspect that Gracq's explanatory note was intended to confuse the reader even further, but who cares? The book is a fascinating trip through an enchanted forest of words and images, and mystification is the destination, not a detour.
