

## **CORRIERE DELLA SERA**

*Biography. The brief glare of unknown characters in the book (Adelphi) winner of the Nonino Prize*

### **The poetry of *Vite minuscole*. Michon, storyteller of darkness**

Claudio Magris

No, they aren't small the lives Pierre Michon's extraordinary book tells, evokes, conjures, grabs by a hem that often tears off, words that pierce the reader's skin like the horseshoe the horse's hoof. The title of this short masterpiece is wrong, perhaps the only flaw in this unbelievable tale from the shadows. Those lives that soon sink back into darkness – like any life does, actually – possess something rare, greatness. The greatness of time that swallows up, of the obscure rows of ancestors who emerge again and disappear again, trees tall in the wind and rotten in the earth in which they fall like mighty Homeric heroes, highsummers and frigid winters, silences around the table and drinks at the inn, where wine soon becomes sweat that mixes with the sweat of toiling in the fields, gusts that survive those they blasted.

Unforgettable characters in the brief glare in which they appear in the story, like a face appearing for a moment in the glow of the lantern that lights up the peasants' room. Generations that blend in the overtaking of faces, smiles, lonelinesses, although each stands out forever, unique and irreplaceable. One falls into darkness as in God's unintelligible hand; at any moment, a memorable passage says, the past begins and the future destroys it all.

A novel, several short stories, a dictionary of lives fleeting like the sound of an animal in the forest and persistent like a rain-discoloured headstone. André Dufourneau who arrives – an unknown child – in the village during a rainy evening, at the house of the narrator's grandmother, a young woman who could be his mother or perhaps become his wife, and later he leaves for Africa where he may or may not become a rich and cruel man. Antoine Peluchet who is sent away from home by his father's gesture one night and ventures into the world, always alive and unreal in his father's speechless astonishment and in the unlikely tales about him at the inn and in the village. Grandparents whose origin is lost in muddy genealogies and whose tenderness, despised and defeated, is like water in the desert. Existences – minimal like each one is, actually – that are

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great, though faded in the evening fogs of days and decades; «the old women of the village, black sentinels on the thresholds and as patient as the day». Perhaps such a dovetail of time and timelessness, that translates into lean and great poetry, can only exist in a peasant world, the most epic and obscure, sad and unliveable, reluctant to civilization and humanity or maybe unaware of them, the knotty and rindless root of life that breaks the ground to grow and then rot.

Pierre Michon loves Borges, like Borges he may also know that there is no way to tell a story, that that one is irredeemably unable to do it. Borges – it is Juan Octàvio Prenez who bears witness and remembers - used to say «I don't know how to narrate». Indeed, how is it possible to narrate a man's life, to know what happens in his head and in his heart, what drives him? Michon probably thinks it is abusive, irresponsible perhaps, to presume to enter someone else's thoughts and feelings. Perhaps one can only capture an expression on his face, see how his hands are moving with exertion, anxiety or happiness, and try to understand, to imagine what the meaning of his fate has been. Genuine literature confirms in the most practical manner Saint Paul's words: «for now we see through a glass, darkly», enigmatically. Literature is also the conjectures we make about the enigmas of the others' selves and ours, without reaching any certainty. This may be why there is in literature a calling to incompleteness, as in Michon's novel *La Grande Beune* for instance.

He hasn't written only *Vite minuscole* (Small Lives) splendidly translated by Leopoldo Carra who, as any true translator creates a writing and in some sense a book as well. A cult author in France – a convenient role and justified in his case, but always undermined by the risk of kitsch - he has also written *Les Treize* (The Thirteen), a book on Terror during the French Revolution – perhaps the first great media even in history – and about the artistic, painted representation of Terror, that is of its main characters. His passion for painting (Tiepolo, Corentin, Lorrain, Watteau, Goya) fosters many of his texts – *Le Roi du bois* (The King of the Woods) for example – and was born of a desire to capture the relationships between life and history, their representations and the soul of who represents them.

Those old black sentinels of the village have a Greek chorus' greatness. They are the opposite of any mediocrity, either progressive and Jacobin or the cloyingly libertine one of the *ancien régime* aristocrats and their salons where marchionesses would say about the Bible that «the Holy Spirit can't write decently». Or even contemporary mediocrity with its opinion leaders and priests and its mass individualism. The meaning of living, writing, being quiet and disappearing is summed up in the name his whole work is addressed to: Rimbaud, with his blaze and his silence,

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Rimbaud the Son as in the title of his most fiery text. Michon mostly converses with the dead, «with my chatty dead» he said, Melville and Flaubert, Faulkner and Beckett, Villon and Hugo who, like the places and names of the Limousin where his anything but small stories are set, talk with him and «proletarian people, dead without having ever made a speech».