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THE MALTESE NOVELS OF NICOLAS SAUDRAY

The French novelist Nicolas Saudray, born in Normandy in 1942, has spent his professional career as an economist in the French civil service; for six years he served on the *conseil d'administration* of the Bibliothèque Nationale. His nine novels (described below) are set in various countries (the Orient, France, Malta, the France of the future) and have as common theme the hunger for faith of the modern world. His two Maltese novels (*Dieu est-il gentilhomme?*, *Chevalerie du soir*) are more "realistic," with less hint of spiritual transcendence, than his other works. They treat the final years of rule of the Order of St. John and the French and British invasions. The novels—novelized history more than fiction—are crammed with vivid incident and are rigorously researched. The knights fail to defend Malta because they have lost faith in their mission. Saudray treats with affectionate exasperation an Order which had refused to reform itself and had lost its reason for existence. The world, Saudray suggests with a certain melancholy, was no longer worthy of the chivalric ideal:

—Nous avons perdu Malte, enchaîne Giulio, parce que nous ne la méritions plus.

—Dis plutôt, réplique Raczynski, que notre époque a perdu sa chevalerie, parce qu'elle n'en était plus digne. (*Chevalerie du soir*, 358)

The Novels of Nicolas Saudray

Le Maître des fontaines (1978), a powerful and disturbing novel of spiritual awakening, raises the question of God's communication with man in an age without religious belief. The lost Gospel of Thaddeus is discovered in a poverty-stricken Jacobite monastery in the Diyarbekir region of Turkey, close to the frontiers of Syria and Iraq. The Gospel, addressed to the Hebrews, although physically a forgery, allows the words of Jesus to be heard anew. The Gospel heralds a possible reconciliation of Christianity and Islam, offers a message of hope to a grey Western world (which includes the Church) craving for faith. Like the original gospels, the Gospel of Thaddeus rapidly inspires conversion and martyrdom. *Le maître des fontaines* is written in a rapid, readable style, with a shifting narratorial perspective which combines dialogue, diaries, *style indirecte libre*, and third-person narrative. As in many of Saudray's novels, a scholarly apparatus is included in the form of notes and historical references to a lost Gospel.

Terres de vent, terres de songe (1979) similarly suggests a need for transcendence, for escape from the insufficiencies of everyday life. *Terres de vent, terres de songe* relates the excursion of four adolescents into an uninhabited mountain region, the Terres Franches, between France and Italy. One of the adolescents elopes with their mysterious guide, apparently one who has returned from the dead, to sojourn in the "kingdom of Dreams," "La patrie de ceux qui n'ont pas été réconciliés, qui n'ont pas eu leur juste part de la vie."

Mourir un jour de fête (1981), set in Saudray's native Normandy and spanning a time period from the Feast of the Assumption (August 15) to the following Easter, offers a realistic account of villagers' reactions to the murder-rape of a child, Paschaline. Tightly constructed, written in a spare prose, *Mourir un jour de fête* proposes a reality that transcends the perceptions of ignorant villagers and sophisticated investigating officials: the intervention from Heaven of the saintly, sacrificed child to bring redemption, forgiveness, and love both to the *bourgeois* murderer and to the mentally-backward farm worker who had falsely accused himself of the crime.

La maison des prophètes (1984) returns to the themes of *Le maître des fontaines*: the craving for faith and transcendence in the modern world and the need for reconciliation between Christianity and Islam. Set in the fictitious nation of Marsanée (a thinly-disguised Lebanon), *La maison des prophètes* portrays the rising fanaticism of certain Islamic groups and of Christian militias and the consequent destruction of the previously-peaceful coexistence of three communities (Moslem, Christian, Jewish). The first-person narrator, the Mozarab (Christian) architect Gabriel, now in exile, had dreamed of designing a mosque which would symbolize the convergence of Christianity and Islam, a convergence which, according to Abouna Pierrot, human imperfection prevents us from grasping. For Abouna Pierrot, the three religions have their specific virtues: faith (Islam), hope (Judaism), charity (Christianity). As in *Le maître des fontaines*, *La maison des prophètes* is accompanied by notes, which in this case refer the reader to the Koran and to the situation of Christians in the Middle East. *La maison des prophètes* was awarded the Prix Méditerranée and the Prix Maurice-Genevoix in 1985. It has been translated into English (*The House of the Prophets*, Doubleday).

Saudray's next two novels, *Dieu est-il gentilhomme?* (1986) and *Chevalerie du soir* (1987), deal with Malta and will be treated later in this article.

In *Voyage au pays des frogs* (1990), a teacher, Monique, who had, with others, been frozen for sixty-five years pending the discovery of a cure for cancer, returns to the Paris of the future. Paris (Big Pear) is dominated by television and drugs; the language spoken is "basic English"

("off-shore American"); French birth-rate is low; the majority *beurs* (Moslems) are the most vital element in France. The France of the future possesses features of the present: a labyrinthine bureaucracy, a hypocritical and selfish *bourgeoisie*. In a society which has neither love nor purpose for existence, Christians are reduced to a tiny group awaiting the return of the Messiah.

Les mangeurs de feu (1994), despite its rather forced plot (a French convert to Islam, the unwitting dupe of a CIA venture to destabilize the Iranian regime, attempts to locate the Twelfth Imam), contains a wealth of information on Shiite and Zoroastrian beliefs. Saudray, in the dedication page, returns to the theme of *Le maître des fontaines*, that of our desperate need for a Messiah:

Ayant perdu le sens du sacré, occidentalisé —plutôt américanisé— de façon agressive, notre monde orphelin a de plus en plus besoin de Quelqu'un. D'une manière ou d'une autre, nous attendons tous le Douzième Imâm.

The Maltese Novels

Dieu est-il gentilhomme ? (1986) covers Maltese life in the period 1768-1791 ("le temps des fêtes et des querelles"). In a brief introductory note, Saudray indicates that "tous les personnages ont réellement vécu, aimé et souffert." The "Annexes" to *Dieu est-il gentilhomme?* provide information on the organization of the Order of St. John in the eighteenth century, copious notes on persons mentioned in the novel (including Saudray's sources and parallels between Maltese history in the past and in the present, such as the conflict between Church and state which reappeared with prime minister Dom Mintoff's conflict with ecclesiastical authority in 1982), and an abundant bibliography. Saudray claims that his sources were mainly archival (the archives of the Order of St. John in the National Library of Malta, the archives of the Inquisition in the cathedral museum of Mdina, numerous French archives).

Saudray's technique is to weave into a panoramic vision fleeting glimpses of numerous historical figures connected with Malta and the Order of St. John. *Dieu est-il gentilhomme?* begins with the arrival in Malta of the eighteen-year-old novice Déodat de Dolomieu of the Languedoc of Auvergne; we follow the quarrelsome Dolomieu's first expedition to sea, his imprisonment in Fort St. Elmo after killing a fellow-novice in a duel, his loves and friendships, his law suits and intrigues, his passion for geology ("dolomite" is named after its discoverer), his travels on geological expeditions and his visits to the Order's properties in France. Other knights of the Order who receive more than passing mention are: the abbé Boyer and the hunchback Abel Loras, both high-

ly intelligent and arch-schemers; the snobbish sailor Prince Camille de Rohan-Rochefort; Giulio Litta, who receives the Russian grand duke Paul Romanoff and travels to Russia to organize a fleet of galleys to fight the Swedes; and the treasurer Ransijat, engaged in a hopeless struggle to control the expenditure of an Order living far beyond its means.

We learn numerous details of the life of the knights: their military training, the education of pages, the services in St. John's Cathedral, the knights' amusements (falconry, performances in the Manuel de Vilhena theater, flirtations, masonic intrigues, alchemy), their rivalry for preferment, their constant disputes over precedence and nation. The Order is attacked by French philosophers as corrupt and anachronistic; its justifications for existence—its fine hospital, where patients have individual beds, and its keeping the Straits of Sicily free from corsairs—are increasingly irrelevant in the late eighteenth century.

Grand Masters evoked are: Pinto de Fonseca, "cet insecte noir et luisant" (21), an astrologer who kept mistresses and who seized the church of the Jesuits; Ximenes de Texada, who died of a fall from horseback; and Emmaneul de Rohan, who became Grand Master in 1775 at the age of fifty. The reformer Rohan had learned Maltese, ennobled members of the Maltese *bourgeoisie*, reopened the university, repaved the roads, lowered the price of wheat, and behaved leniently towards Maltese rebels and disorderly members of the Order. Rohan possessed charm, but lacked the firmness necessary to deal with quarrelsome knights, outside pressures, and constant financial problems. Rohan's values are those of the Enlightenment. For Rohan, God is a fellow "gentilhomme." As the cynical abbé Boyer explains, "Dieu ne parle à personne au-dessous de quatre quartiers de noblesse" (94); however, with the French Revolution threatening the property of the Order, Rohan realizes that: "Non, vraiment, Dieu n'est plus gentilhomme" (282)

The history related in *Dieu est-il gentilhomme?* is threefold: the history of the Maltese, the history of the knights of St. John in Malta and in Europe, and the outside historical pressures which affect the situation of the Order. The high price of grain in the summer of 1775 led to brigandage and to the rebellion headed by the Floriana priest Dun Gaetan Mannarino, who complained of the lack of piety of the knights and seized Fort St. Elmo and the cavalier of Italy before being obliged to surrender. Maltese nobles proclaimed their loyalty to the rule of the Order. Despite Rohan's reforms, the knights remained unpopular with the Maltese. To control discontent, Rohan planned a Maltese regiment, one third of whose members would be Maltese. A focus of Maltese opposition was to be found in the Church. The powerful cathedral chapter was in Maltese hands; despite the antagonism of many knights, a Maltese, Albino Menville, was elected prior of St. John's. Out of a population of

37,000 males, 7,000 Maltese, many of whom were married, could claim clerical privileges, including not paying taxes. Brigands could escape justice by seeking the immunity of country chapels.

The meeting of the General Chapter of the Order in Valletta in 1776 demonstrated the impossibility of reforming the Order from within. Rohan's lack of firmness, disputes over precedence and nation, and financial problems weakened the Council, which, for Dolomieu, offered a proof that "toute aristocratie dégénère en gérontologie" (146). Rohan established an Anglo-Bavarian Langue, to which Polish knights could be admitted; the Langue of Provence disputed with the Anglo-Bavarian Langue the garrisoning of forts; the Langues of Auvergne and Provence united against Rohan's reforms. Dolomieu, defeated in an election in the Langue of Auvergne, appealed through the Inquisition to Rome and to France. Other knights, disappointed in decisions of the Order, could appeal to the Inquisitor Scotti, who referred all disputes to Rome. Upon Rohan's urging the Pope to suppress the Tribunal of the Inquisition in Malta as a useless body, the Pope blocked all appointments within the Order. For Rohan, Malta was too small an island to contain the energies of some 300 to 400 knights, condemned to the inactivity of peace, educated as nobles to defend minor points of honor; furthermore, the checks and balances of the constitution of the Order encouraged endless disputes. Dolomieu, leaving Malta for revolutionary France, reflected that, despite its intrigues, the Order could offer itself as an example of a league of nations:

L'île des orangers, c'était surtout l'île des intrigues. Une chevalerie sans but, retournée contre elle-même —et secrétant quand même une amitié assez rare. Une société des nations, volontiers dissonante, souvent troublée, mais que le continent aurait pu prendre en exemple, au lieu de faire la guerre. (297)

The position of the Order of St. John in Malta depended on a wider European political context. Russia, implicated in the Maltese rising of 1775, schemes to purchase the sovereignty of Malta from the grotesque Neapolitan royal family. Rohan must negotiate the restoration of the Polish priories and procure funds from Prussia and Bavaria. With France's attention being concentrated on England, Vienna pressures the Order to reform. Knights of the Order pursue their rancors in European courts. The Neapolitans confiscate Sicilian properties of the Order. Finally, the French Revolution leads to the abolition of tithes, the sale of the property of the clergy, and the imminent jeopardy of the Order's French revenues.

Saudray refers to numerous features of Maltese life: the Strada Stretta (where duels are allowed), the island winds (*majjistrat*, *grégal*,

sirocco), the orange trees and windmills, the lack of water, the necessity to import food, the rocks and catacombs, the well-organized system of quarantine, Maltese crops (rotation of wheat, cotton, vegetables), the vicissitudes of galley slaves, the ancient statues of Hagar Qim, the trapping of birds, the Maltese aristocracy (disdainful of the knights, exceedingly pious) and their Mdina palaces, a rural wedding, the costumes of carnival, the celebrations of September 8. Occasionally, Maltese words are used: *fenech* (hare); "*Sliem ghalik, o salib*" (98) (exclaimed by Dolomieu's maid); "*Moulay Allah, Sultan-is-sema*" (Sinjura Bettina's prayer). Individual knights seek remedies for the island's poverty: Dolomieu constructs economic ovens for the bakery of Valletta and has a project for manufacturing porcelain; knights plan to use wind power for a sawmill; Admiral Suffren imports Malabarese Indians to teach the Maltese the weaving of Indian cloth. The Polish count Jean Patocki loves the Maltese countryside with its magnificent village churches. Maltese peasants are hard-working; there is less poverty, Dolomieu declares, in Malta than in France. Maltese houses and villages are cleaner than those of Lower Dauphiné and Sicily.

Dolomieu lovingly evokes Malta and its people:

En fait d'infidèles, on n'avait sous la main que des descendants de convertis : quelques centaines de chevaliers dominaient cent mille maltais. Ces curieuses créatures noiraudes, incompréhensibles, étrangement préservés de l'indolence orientale, s'affairaient dans l'ombre de leurs échoppes, ou sur la terre avare de leurs champs. Le coton occupait les meilleurs sols. Mais chaque métairie, chaque ville recelait son bosquet d'orangers, défendu des regards et des vents par de hauts murs. Et, au printemps, ces présences invisibles embaumaient le chemin du promeneur, comme un poème.

Malte, île au goût de sel et d'orange. Monde enchanté que l'on craignait de faire disparaître en se frottant les yeux. (11)

La Vallette. Toujours la même pierre blonde, la même réverbération sur les phares. Toujours les rues plongeantes, où déambulent des insectes noirs : femmes aux trois quarts voilées, bourgeois copiant les abbés, abbés contents de l'être, commandeurs singeant les baillis, baillis singeant les grands maîtres. Seule touche de couleur, les gardes de Son Altesse, écarlates sous leurs bonnets à poil.

Mais quand tu seras las, ami, de toute cette pruderie, tu n'auras qu'à glisser à tribord, jusqu'à la criée des poissons, ou à babord, vers le Mandragg, pour retrouver les pêcheurs coiffés de rouge et les jolies filles aux pieds nus. Même là, les rues sont plus propres que celles de France, grâce aux cochons en liberté qui assurent le service du nettoie-ment. Vois ceux qui ont l'oreille fendue ! Ils appartiennent à la confrérie des Ames du Purgatoire, et les citadins pieux les nourrissent par prédilection. (65)

The minor novelistic intrigue concerns the Sinjura Bettina, friend (and perhaps mistress) of Rohan, and her violent squabbles with her husband. The family exemplify Rohan's wish to create a body of Maltese landowners loyal to the Order; Rohan had elevated Bettina's freemason husband and her brother to the nobility. In an attempt to embarrass the Grand Master, the Inquisition investigates both husband and brother. Two incidents are, according to Saudray, based on his archival research: Bettina's attempt to kill her husband by sorcery and her slave's taking sanctuary in a church with a demand to be returned to Morocco. At a lower social level, a further minor amorous intrigue has Sergeant (and later *donat*) Doublet court and marry Lunzjata, who works in a fish market.

Chevalerie du soir (1987) continues the story of Malta and of the Order of St. John from 1792 to the definitive British occupation of the islands. As in *Dieu est-il gentilhomme?*, Saudray uses numerous brief episodes, ranging from three lines to three or four pages, conversation, reflections, and historical commentary to produce a highly effective panoramic vision. The two sieges of Malta (by the French and the British) are described in considerable and vivid detail; perspectives of invaders, besieged, and the Maltese are given. The persons evoked, save for the Maltese family Buhagiar-Carbott and the slave Sabaheddine, are taken from historical archives and chronicles. At the end of the novel Saudray provides notes on his sources and a bibliography.

Chevalerie du soir is crammed with historical detail, with reference both to Malta and to the larger international scene. The young French knights are trapped in Malta, cut off from the larger movements of history. The French properties of the Order have been sequestered; French knights have lost their citizenship and are banned from France. Malta, deprived of resources, cannot provide enough oarsmen for its galleys and is forced to sell slaves to the sultan of Morocco. The Order desperately needs a protector, whether from France, Great Britain, or Russia. The reformer Rohan, "maltais de cœur" (135), dies on 13 July 1797; his inadequate successor is the fifty-three-year-old Ferdinand von Hompesch, the *protégé* of the Austrian Emperor. Almost immediately, Hompesch is faced with the arrival of Napoleon's fleet, to which he ignominiously surrenders (June 1798). Malta is transferred to French sovereignty; Hompesch receives a large indemnity (to be paid by selling the Maltese property of the knights); the Maltese receive guarantees for their religion and property; "Tout est perdu, même l'honneur" (214). The Order had become an anachronism; incapable of reforming itself, persisting in its aristocratic exclusivity and vain disputes, it had failed to win the affection of its Maltese subjects.

With equal detail, Saudray evokes the subsequent fortunes of the French in Malta: Napoleon's supposed reforms, the pillaging of the

Cathedral of St. John, the news of Nelson's destruction of the French fleet in Aboukir Bay (1 August 1798), French exactions, the Maltese rising in Mdina, the protracted siege of Valletta by land and sea, the sufferings of the besieged, French surrender (September 1800), (in a note) the subsequent fortunes of the Maltese sympathizers who depart the island with the French.

Saudray portrays the British occupation favorably. Captain Ball, serving as acting governor in the Palace of San Anton, energetically strives to win Maltese sympathies and to prevent other foreign powers (France, the Order of St. John, Naples, Russia) from gaining a foothold in Malta. Sinjura Bettina approves English manners as frankly superior to those of previous occupiers. Under the British, Malta gains prosperity and tranquility: goods are smuggled from Malta into the Europe of Napoleon's continental system; many British troops pass through and are supplied in Malta; the Jews return; Captain Ball is esteemed by the Maltese.

Much of the action of *Chevalerie du Soir* concerns the activities of knights of the Order outside of Malta. The knight Giulio Litta negotiates in Russia the ambitious plans for two Russian Grand Priories (Catholic and Orthodox), with Tsar Paul as Grand Master of the Order; Tsar Paul's assassination in March 1800 ends Russian interest in Malta and the Order. Fifty-two knights join Napoleon's expedition to Egypt; their Egyptian adventures and contributions to science are described in detail. Attention is also given to diplomatic negotiations concerning Malta (the Treaty of Amiens and the Congress of Vienna), Hompesch's sad wanderings, papal policies toward the Order, Russia's constant intrigues to become a Mediterranean power, the atrocities of the counter-revolutionary rulers of Naples.

As in *Dieu est-il gentilhomme?*, numerous references to the customs, activities, and landscape of Malta are introduced into *Chevalerie du Soir*: the two-wheeled carriages, the fortifications of Valletta, Maltese cleanliness (akin to that of Holland) and prosperity (greater than Italy's), the ill-trained native militia, the overpopulation of the island (partly relieved by British recruitment for its navy), the procession of All Souls Day with its statue of Il Marbut, Maltese celebration of Epiphany, the Blue Grotto, the three-tailed lizard of Filfla, the medicinal fungus found in Gozo, the outbreak of plague in March 1813, when 4,600 people die. Maltese is sparingly used for local color: the exclamation "Salib imqades" (56), the hymn "Ikun imbierek Allah" (266).

Maltese individuals are mentioned. The young Franco-Maltese Nicolo Isoard writes music for cantatas. Mikiel-Anton Vassalli attempts to create a Maltese written language. Censu Barbara proposes the formation of a Maltese Langue open to commoners and married men; Barbara later conspires against Rohan, joins Napoleon's forces, and is

finally captured by a Tunisian corsair. In France, the defrocked monk Zammit attacks the Order. The noble Count Ciantar-Paléologue, a poet and archaeologist, is informed of workers' discovery of pre-Roman remains, including human skeletons and the tusks of dwarf elephants (Hal Saflieni). The priest and professor of philosophy Dun Mikiel Xerri is shot by the French, "laissant dans le cœur des Maltais une cicatrice durable" (308).

Invented characters are the family of the washer girl from the cave houses of Mandragg, Lucija Buhagiar, who is courted by the young French knight Antoine de Saint Exupéry, despite the hostility of her uncle, the gruff priest Dun Rokku Buhagiar. Her brother Pinu Buhagiar deserts from the French navy in Egypt to join the British. A further fictitious incident centers around the young Tunisian galley-slave Kassem ben Hussein, whom Saint Exupéry befriends and assists in a thwarted attempt to escape.

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Saudray and Malta

Nicolas Saudray has kindly forwarded to the author the following comments on his relations with Malta:

Quelques remarques sur mes rapports avec Malte

Ce qui m'a attiré à Malte

Depuis longtemps, je m'intéresse au Proche-Orient. Je parle un peu arabe. Or Malte est comme la pile d'un pont (détruit, ou non encore construit) entre l'Europe et l'Orient.

Pourquoi j'ai écrit "Dieu est-il gentilhomme?" (Malte à la fin du XVIIIème siècle)

J'étais fasciné par cette petite société si particulière, hors du temps —les chevaliers mécréants d'un côté, les pieus Maltais de l'autre— avec ses rites compliqués, ses violentes querelles pour des enjeux futiles. Décadence d'une institution glorieuse, masquée par une fête brillante.

Pourquoi j'ai écrit "Chevalerie du soir" (Malte de 1789 à 1816).

Deux phénomènes m'avaient frappé:

- des chevaliers chargés d'un passé prestigieux capitulent sans combat devant Bonaparte, parce qu'ils ont cessé de croire en eux-mêmes;
- cette modeste île, escale oubliée sur la route de l'Orient, devient soudain l'objet de toutes les convoitises (France, Angleterre, Russie) et

constitue pendant quelques années le noeud de la politique européenne.

Mes séjours à Malte

Trois séjours durant mes vacances, passés:

- à consulter les archives de l'Ordre, à La Valette, ainsi que celles de l'inquisition de Malte, à Mdina;
- à parcourir l'île en autobus ou à pied.

Mes impressions de Malte

A La Valette, ainsi que dans certains faubourgs, et à Mdina, le passé est resté très présent. On a le sentiment que les chevaliers sont partis hier.

J'aime, dans les campagnes, ces grandes églises à coupole (presque disproportionnées par rapport aux villages) que l'on découvre dans toutes les directions.

J'aime aussi les paysages tourmentés, presque déserts, du nord de l'île et de Gozo.

Bibliography of the Novels of Nicolas Saudray

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Les oranges de Yalta (Balland, 1992).

Les mangeurs de feu (Balland, 1994).

¹⁴In his edition of Vico's *Opere* (Milano-Napoli: Ricciardi, 1953), p. 517, n.2.

¹⁵A fact which, as Nicolini observes in his *Commento storico alla seconda Scienza nuova* (Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1978), I, p. 147, was pointed out as early as 1749 by Damiano Romano.

¹⁶p. 11 of the 1577 edition (Parisiis: Apud Martinum Iuvenem). For Fox-Morzillo's use of the definition and for his relationship with Bodin, see John L. Brown, *The Methodus ad Facilem Historiarum Cognitionem of Jean Bodin: A Critical Study* (Washington: The Catholic University of America, 1939), pp. 61-62.