

IN THE WORLD OF THE VARIANTS

From the moment of his birth, Abel seemed to belong to a different race from his brothers; subsequently, a strange atmosphere seemed to isolate him from children and adults alike. No one ever discovered the reason for that anomaly. It was unrelated to his physical make-up—or, at least, did not seem to be. He had the fair hair and white face of men who set off from the North in their deckless boats to conquer lands, steal riches and rape women. In his province, the descendants of such men abounded.

He inspired a sort of disquiet, and the sentiment of very distant things, lost in Space and Time.

His speech also seemed unusual, even though, until the age of 12, he had not said anything extraordinary. Sometimes, some unspecifiable mystery was sketched out, quickly lost in familiar words. His gestures generated unease; even when he did exactly the same thing as other children, it seemed that he did so in accordance with a different orientation, as if he were carrying out left-handed movements with his right hand.

At an early age, he astonished some people with his subtle nature; for them, he evoked existences hidden in the islands or the solitudes of the sea, dreams enveloped in mist, depths in which obscure plant life and abyssal beasts were at war.

He belonged to a mediocre and placid family, untormented by any devastating dream. A few acres of soil surrounded a humble house, into which light penetrated through numerous little windows pierced in the four façades. The orchard yielded the fruits of the region; vegetables abounded in the kitchen-garden; two cows and four goats lived on exceedingly green grass. Because the family had a near-horror of meat, it led an easy life whose joys were not cruel.

The father, Hugues Faverol, a surveyor, assured the family's present and consolidated its future; the mother, gentle and incoherent, would have managed the household badly, but a maidservant and an old gardener regulated the affairs of the house, the stable and the land.

The turbulence and mischievousness of Abel's brothers was supportable; because he was the eldest and the strongest he had no difficulty defending himself. Although there were obstacles between him and those whom he loved from the outset, he scarcely perceived the singular dissimilarity between his universe and the universe of other men before his 12th year.

He saw, heard and felt all that they saw, felt and heard, but around and within every appearance an unknown appearance emerged. Thus, he perceived two distinct worlds, although they occupied the same space: two terrestrial worlds that coexisted, with all their creatures.

Abel eventually realized that he was linked to both worlds. That discovery, which became more precise by the day, he was fearful of revealing, even to his mother, and it was indirectly, by means of questions that alarmed his kinfolk, that he assured himself of his utter originality. Finally sure that the double world existed for him alone, he sensed that the revelation of his reality was pointless, and might be dangerous.

For several years, however, the world that penetrated every part of the world of human beings remained indistinct. One might have thought that Abel perceived it by means of rudimentary senses, as a sea-urchin might perhaps perceive the ocean and the rock to which it clings. At length, the world diversified. He began to establish there the order that a child establishes among the incessant metamorphoses of his environment, and it did not take long for him to realize that in the other universe, he was younger than he was in the human world.

No human terminology could express the existences and phenomena that he discerned; apprehended by senses whose development became increasingly rapid, they revealed nothing of that which hearing, sight, touch, taste or smell reveal to us, nothing that we could perceive or imagine.

The living things were the last to appear to him. It took him several months to assimilate their total appearance; unlike our animals and vegetables they had no fixed structures: a series of forms, incessantly changing, unfolded in a near-constant order, repeating themselves and thus forming cyclic individuals. As Abel subsequently learned, they live much longer than the living beings of our realm. As soon as he had grasped their mode of existence he recognized them, at first in their essence, then in their individuality, as easily as we recognize a song or a symphony.

Their diversity was as great as, and perhaps greater than, the diversity of our fauna and flora. The inferior species had slow and monotonous cycles. As one ascended through the hierarchy, the variations became more rapid and more complex; in the highest degrees, several cycles unfolded in concert, confused and distinct at the same time.

Abel perceived all this, with increasing clarity, in the manner of children—which, by virtue of not being embarrassed by method, is swifter and more penetrating. He soon found out that the Variants, as he named them, developed differently from animals or plants. Their extent did not increase; they were no smaller at birth than subsequently, but were vaguer, with incoherent cycles; gradually, their movements gained in coherence; they attained their full harmony after evolutions that were more numerous the more highly placed they were within the hierarchy.

It was on a June evening that Abel realized that he was himself both a human and a Variant—an evening when the clouds prolonged their metamorphosis. Weary of grazing the warm air, the swallows were chasing one another with hectic cries, drunk on a pleasure that filled the young man with compassion and tenderness. They seemed to him as ephemeral as those fragile countries hollowed out in crepuscular vapors—and, seized by an anguish, he had taken the hand of his mother, whom he loved more than any other creature.

They were alone. They seemed to be seeing the same appearances of the Universe, but, sensing instinctively that he was going further than she into the mystery of things, his mother said, with a touch of fear: “What are you thinking about?”

That was a moment when the world of the Variants was superimposed more narrowly upon the world of human beings, and Abel had his Revelation.

Until then, his human life had been so predominant that Variant Life had seemed entirely exterior. That evening he knew that he participated in the two Lives. Bowled over, he ceased to perceive his mother’s presence. Frightened by the sight of a face as motionless as a mineral and staring eyes whose pupils were expanding in the dim light, she squeezed his hand in anguish.

“Abel...my little one! What’s the matter?”

He looked at her without seeing her; then, like a man coming out of a trance, he murmured, without thinking about what he was saying: “I was living in the other world.”

She did not understand; she thought that he was thinking about death and the eternal soul. “You mustn’t think about that, my darling. You need to live with us!”

So distant as she was from Abel’s reality, she would have been vainly and sadly burdened by a confidence. Embracing her with a gentleness mingled with considerable anguish, he acquiesced in an ambiguous manner. “I don’t have to think about it,” he said.

The human evening returned, with its stars, its infinity lost in other infinities. Abel was still awake, his heart in tumult, when the other members of his family had gone to sleep.

In spite of his revelation, Abel only had a confused consciousness of his own cycles, similar to that which we have of our bodies, whose innumerable functions are only known to us, very imperfectly, by virtue of the experience of thousands of ancestors. Just as we know that we are human, however, he knew that he was a Variant.

There was nothing to indicate to him the species—if one can speak in terms of species in this instance—to which he belonged. Was he one of those whose intelligence could not communicate with others, or could only communicate in the elementary fashion in which it is transmitted between our higher animals? Or had he received the gift of communicating his ideas to other Variants—a gift that did not seem, as it is on Earth, to be the prerogative of a single species?

While he sought to discover this, his terrestrial life passed through the essential crisis; for several seasons it dominated his Variant life to such an extent that the latter, without ever ceasing to be perceptible, sank into a kind of torpor. Still a child among the Variants, he became an adult among humans, submissive to the sparkling folly of puberty.

Woman, becoming the redoubtable principle of his two existences, saturated him with visions that were tragic, by virtue of their sharpness, centralized around the savage receptacle of generation, the image of which is, for so many young humans, an Eden that they despair of ever attaining.

Because he was timid to the point of dementia, he lived in a storm of desires exasperated by the fictions that our ancestors have accumulated around the Act, already fabulous in the darkness of primal instinct. He was the insect ready to die for the sake of fecundation, the wild beast maddened by the hectic pursuit through the desert, the savage prowling around the female with a club or spear, the barbarian warrior raping the wives and daughters of the vanquished, the poet assembling the reflections of Earth and sky, the morning light, the beauties of vegetation and the innumerable elementary sensations sublimated by centuries of dreams.

From brutal desire, already magnified by an extraordinary primitive legend, and from instinct brought down to and concentrated in sex, emerged the mystical grace in which the adolescent, prostrating himself before a sacred creature, fears the Act as a sacrilege...

The woman of instinct surged forth initially, with her brutal face, her thick jaws and a man as coarse as that of thoroughbred mares. Merely in seeing her walk, revealing her strong ankles, parting her legs, he knew the vertigo of forests, and glimpsed the cave ready to seize him...¹

He thought of her frenetically during the nights of August; he extended his arms, he begged, moaned, wept. He encountered her every day, and everywhere. How near she was!—and so distant, at the other end of life,

¹ Sexual symbolism is inevitably difficult to translate, because French *double entendres* and English ones frequently lack correspondence, so English readers will have to take it on trust that such passages as this one seem somewhat less inelegant in French.

ungraspable and inaccessible. Overwhelmed by his timidity, in spite of many contacts, in spite of his loneliness, he had never made the gesture...

One day, sitting next to her, the others having departed one by one, his audacity went so far as to let him remain there, trembling and shivering, until dusk fell...

She did not put on the light. They said nothing. Intolerable fever tortured them. Finally, despairing of seeing him take action, she moved closer to him with the slowness of the minute-hand of a clock. She took possession of that young intoxicated body and gave him a mute dream, boundless joy, glory and triumph. She saturated him with a wild happiness, for which he retained an eternal gratitude, which did not impede the other dream of emergence.

There was almost as much difference between the two adventures as between a female gorilla and the whitest and most delicate human female...

When he recovered the woman with the coarse hair, the trees, the grass and the Earth exuding a phosphorescent scent, he immersed himself in the caress as in a river of flesh—but when he arrived next to the other, whom he never possessed, he knew the miracle of every form, every sound, every odor, of the cloud floating over the hill and of that other cloud, made of stars without number, which throws a milky veil over the estival night.

Thus passed six seasons, during which, an adult on Earth, he remained a child in the twin world.

Then the woman with the coarse hair left him to pursue other adventures; replete, he scarcely missed her. The other, taken away by her family never to return, was lost in one of those lands that the Assassins of Humankind have stolen from red-skinned people.

In the era that followed, the world of the Variants began to dominate the human world within him, and he finally recognized his species—one of those that was able to communicate thought.

After six more seasons, he finally approached adulthood there, and began to be moved by the legend of their generation. It differed strangely from our animal legend. The sexes had no definite existence. A Variant could be male relative to some of his own kind, female to others. At the limits, however, rare beings existed who were purely male, and others purely female.

Abel had not yet experienced the union that presentiment announced by way of the disturbance caused by certain Presences, especially those belonging to the purely feminine category. While he completed his radiant increase he linked himself with Variants toward which he was attracted by a predilection they showed for him. Incapable of perceiving his double nature, they were surprised by his appearance; linked to his human body, his variant body was confined to a limited sphere in which it moved very rapidly. He dared not offer any explanation, and the Variants did not ask him for one. Gradually, he came to understand them almost as well as he understood human beings.

They escape the worst animal necessities—including the necessity of nourishing themselves at the expense of other lives—and possess no means of destroying one another; disease and fatal accidents were unknown in their world. None of the terrestrial cataclysms disrupt the rhythms by which they live; death only occurs by virtue of an exhaustion whose cause is unknown to them; it is a slow and gentle decline into unconsciousness.

Their existence involves some suffering, but tolerable ones. Their lives are not without chagrin or adventures, nor without sexual love, but the mysterious universal distribution has spared them ferocious tragedy, the immolation of the weak by the strong, frightful tortures and monstrous deaths.

Their nutrition is primarily energetic; their physiology is economical and maintains itself at the expense of inanimate substances, although their activity requires a perpetual collaboration with the environment. They obtain their nutrition by the absorption and incessant transformation of radiations of every sort.

It seems that their sense of beauty is more complex, more intense and more constant than those of human beings, and involved in all their actions. The kinds of rudimentary art that involve a taste for nutriment, vegetal perfumes, the forms of certain plants, flowers or animals, are replaced in them by an indefinite number of esthetic sensations, much more intense than those known to humans. To “assimilate” phenomena they have a legion of senses, which form harmonic series that have a “grasp” of the environment that is both powerful and subtle.

Love attains an incomparable splendor there; all the powers and sensibilities of creatures participate in it. It escapes the repugnant servitudes of terrestrial love, the odious mixture of vital functions and grotesque movements. Physical contact is no more necessary than it is for us to have physical contact with a melody, a painting, a statue, a flower or a landscape, and yet no contact can awake sharper or more subtle sensations. It is, in sum, an exchange of rhythms and imponderable fluids. It can last longer, without any fatigue, only ceases by virtue of the extinction of a superabundance of energy, and is not long delayed in resumption. It requires the absolute acquiescence of the two beings. Possession by violence is impracticable among the Variants; desire cannot develop unless it excites desire; the idea of egoistic enjoyment is scarcely conceivable.

Apart from a few obscure instincts to which nothing responded, Abel remained ignorant of Variant love for some time. He only began to understand when he encountered the individual whom he named, in terrestrial language, Liliale.

Entirely feminine, she was more sympathetic than any of her peers to Abel's latent strangeness. In spite of her considerable youth, she had a superior perception of her universe; among the Variants, experience depends much more on the perfection of persona cycles than the duration of circumstances. An individual like Liliale absorbed the variations of ambient life with an extreme intensity, rapidity and surety.

Although surprised by the limitation of Abel's movements, she did not see it as an infirmity, sensing a composite nature strangely different from and strangely comparable to Variant existence. Also perceiving that only he revealed himself partially, not for reasons of duplicity but out of some mysterious dread, she refrained from interrogating him; it was he who finally understood that a confession was inevitable.

It was one morning in terms of the mortal Earth, but in the world of the Variants, where time is not measured in terms of the motion of a central star, there are no mornings, evenings or seasons, only variations due to the interactions of worlds. Abel was simultaneously aware of the earthly morning, which was a morning in spring, and the complex phase of his other life. His double nature was subject to an excitement full of charm.

"What's the matter?" his friend had asked. "You seem to be somewhere else."

"It's just that there's a harmony within me more vibrant than my two lives," he replied.

"Your two lives?" she queried, less surprised than he might have expected.

"It's time you knew, Liliale. I'm different from all the other beings in this world we all inhabit...and those of another world, to which I find myself bound. Or rather, I am bound to both at the same time."

"That's a fearful mystery," said Liliale, "and so dolorous! I sense that it's true...everything about you speaks of existences beyond my own, a world incomparable with ours...and I love you more because of it, in spite of the fear—which will never cease—of losing you!"

"Ah!" he said. "In spite of their melancholy, those words are sweeter than all the joys of the other world...where, however, I have known marvelous joys..."

A profound disturbance began to overtake them, which was already changing the nature of their tenderness and could not be hidden—for although the Variants have their secret life, which none may penetrate without consent, it is impossible for them to hide their love from beloved individuals as soon as the latter love in their turn. Reciprocal love is a mutual penetration of two consciousnesses, although there is a period of growth during which each may guard the secret, always with increasing difficulty. Then the communication becomes perfect, and when the lovers are in one another's presence, nothing that happens in the mind of one can be concealed from the other.

That moment had arrived for Liliale and Abel; almost abruptly, they found that they were a single being. All speech became unnecessary. Liliale understood Abel as directly as he understood himself. Terrestrial love, for Abel, was no longer anything more than an exceedingly poor sentiment, for which he felt pity...

That lasted until the time when Liliale began to bear the being that she had conceived with Abel. Like the creative act itself, maternity did not have the repulsive aspects that it assumes in humans; the child comprised subtle rhythms added to Liliale's rhythms, and rendered the mother more harmonious and more beautiful. Then Abel experienced strange moments in which the world of the Variants was almost completely effaced by the world of human beings, and other moments in which humans were no more than the shadow of a dream. Then he was extraordinarily happy in the two existences.

The child was born, whose cycles were vague and disordered for some time. It was a young chaos; slowly it became a harmony, which resembled Liliale. Abel loved it profoundly, and was loved by it. It had a sense of the human world that its mother lacked, but it did not live doubly, as Abel did. Men, animals and plants were for the child a world fantastic and real, intangible and impenetrable, the life and movements of which it could perceive without understanding their meaning. As it did not possess any organ comparable to eyes or ears, its perception was extremely different from that of its father—as sharp and as subtle but without embracing relatively motionless forms. On the contrary, humans and animals were, from its viewpoint, series of very numerous vortices, with less mobile nodes and centers that corresponded to specialized organs like the heart, the liver, the stomach and the brain.

That was a happy time, among humans as among the Variants—a time of plenty, in which Abel lived his double life fully.

However, his terrestrial body was approaching old age while he was still young in his other life. A time of dolor succeeded the time of felicity; Abel's mother died and his father shortly afterwards, and with his dispersed brothers there was only negligible communication.

Terrestrial years passed, and the day came when Abel consented to quit the human world. His death was almost voluntary—a renunciation devoid of suffering—and he then belonged uniquely to Variant life, without ceasing to perceive the milieu in which he had lived, but no longer possessing the same senses. His memories being fragmentary, the creatures who had been his kin melted into scarcely-individualized collectives...

And he had time before him: the centuries that the Variants live, while his descendants increased and multiplied indefinitely...