

Corinne Hoex. **Le grand menu**
Paris. L'Olivier (Seuil, distr.). 2001
124 pages. 90 F. ISBN 2-87929-282-4

REMINISCENT OF THE physically and psychologically distorted images of little girls and their parents in the paintings of Balthus, Corinne Hoex's novel *Le grand menu* offers readers a verbal replication of an emotionally dysfunctional trinity: father, mother, and little girl. The girl's monologue, which runs the entire course of the volume, is both unusual and arresting for the objectivity, detachment, and compelling *simplicity* of its observations on the world her parents have created for her. Like the castle in Strindberg's *Dream Play* (1902), which gave access to a secret, sinister, and imprisoning inner sanctum, so Hoex's emotionally closeted child opens readers up to her unconscious probings. Each chapter conveys one or more of the young girl's torments, set down by a highly conscious, astute writer endowed with a remarkable sense of humor — a true *pince-sans-rire* type.

In that all doors, windows, and other orifices are tightly sealed in the child's house, a sense of claustrophobia envelops the atmosphere from the very outset. Neither exit nor entry is possible, and no fresh air penetrates this hermetically sealed household. The child lives exclusively within herself. She is taught never to open the door to strangers for fear of being kidnapped. Fear of the outer world has been instilled in her by her parents from the outset. Since both parents work, they are rarely at home. Alone much of the time, the child finds some sense of quietude by hiding under the table.

The rigidity of her parents' well-regulated world dominates every aspect of the child's thoughts: from the excellent construction of the house — built exclusively with dead matter such as travertine instead of marble — to the precious objects set in perfect order throughout the place. Their shadows convey notions of silence, bitterness, and sham for the

little girl. Nor are her mother's comments concerning her awkwardness — she is a threat to the crystals decorating the rooms — less hurtful. In contrast, the child has been given many dolls. Not only has she endowed each with an individual name, but she has taught them manners and obedience.

At meals, the mother sits on one side of the table, the father on the other, both admonishing the child to chew her food well, then to swallow it. Dessert is particularly delectable, for it is then that Hoex cleverly intertwines food and sex into a jolly verbal mix replete with sensual undertones spoken by the child.

The chapter on punishments meted out by the father is frightening, hinting as it does of incest. He has terrible tempers: "Sa bouche se contracte, ses dents se serrent, son front se plisse, son visage s'abaisse comme un ciel sous l'orage, des nuages s'amassent et cernent le regard et un épais jus noir remonte des orbites." He locks the child in a closet, giving her plenty of time to reflect on her evil deeds. He never forgives. Nor are nightmares uncommon to the little girl, who sees herself in continuous flight, surmounting crevasses and ravines just to get away!

The cleverest and most humorous chapters in *Le grand menu* deal with the child's understanding of religious concepts, and her interpretations of the paintings, images, and statuettes garnishing the homes of the devout, as well as those decorating the altars and walls of churches, rectories, and so forth. A bravo to Corinne Hoex on the publication of her original and highly recommended first work!

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