

Under the Bridge Mirabeau

Sous le pont Mirabeau

Presented by: Dorota Walczak-Delanois

The novel, which is also a narrative, is political in its feminine perspective, serving as a tacit plea for peace. It presents only the facts, sober emotions and unique thoughts, and everyone can find something to relate to in this story, a tribute to civilians and mothers. It is a struggle devoid of any trace of violence, and the title alludes to Apollinaire's famous poem, in a kind of intertextual dialogue, whilst simultaneously signifying both a sense of cultural belonging and the feeling of being timeless in a world where the days and nights of journeys blend together and lose their significance. The novel can also be regarded as a poetic novel, written in exquisite language, attentive to the reality it depicts and its literary rendering.

This is a story-novel told in the third person, in a simple but poetical style, which recounts the trip of a woman and her newborn baby during the Second World War. We do not know the identity of the main character, nor her first name, nor her surname. Nor do we know the names of the people the main character meets and speaks to. This makes the story universal. Yet "she", the main protagonist, is the very first word of the novel and the very first character. We meet her in the maternity ward of a hospital in Brussels during the bombing. She has just given birth and will be forced to leave the hospital as part of the evacuation of patients and civilians. Her thoughts at that moment and her view of the world as she travels along the road with others are revealed to us. We see the world through the eyes of this 'displaced person'. As she lies in her first evacuation vehicle, her field of vision is then restricted to what she can see from the vehicle; whilst she tries to lull her newborn baby to sleep or breastfeeds it. There are twenty-five lorries in the evacuation convoy, carrying women, men and children.

The microcosm of this female protagonist, fragile yet strong, is set against the outside world, which is in turmoil with the mobilisation of soldiers, the movement of armies, the sieges of towns, cities and the bombardments. She is physically and mentally fragile, having only just given birth to her little girl, yet she is strong enough to bring life into the world and sustain it amidst the hardships of daily life, and to make her mark on history by building a life rather than destroying it: « Tandis que des défenses d'homme cèdent devant de beaux soldats puissants » (p. 8.) (trad. : Whilst human defences crumble before handsome, powerful soldiers).

The world is recorded and recounted through her (and the) senses: the vibration of the windows, the trembling of the walls, which recur at regular, rapid intervals, the smell of smoke and gas. She meets people, described by their first names and where they come from, a point of reference, as everyone is making their way through the war. The journey takes her from Brussels to the south of France via various stops along the way. The woman sometimes walks supported on either side by men or women, always with her young child. The worries shared by everyone, finding somewhere to sleep and something to eat, are also her worries. She frets about her child's father, whilst news of

besieged Paris and the Battle of Dunkirk spreads rapidly. The story begins in May 1943 and ends in July 1943, and, with a few minor details, reflects a significant part of the author's own life story.

LANGUAGE: French / Français

CENSORSHIP STATUS: