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Rachilde's *La Tour d'amour* (1899): A Translated Extract

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Rachilde's *La Tour d'amour* tells a story of loneliness, guilt, and sexual obsession set in the perilous world of a lighthouse off the Brittany coast, creating a gripping psychological drama. Although this novel stands among Rachilde's finest work, it remains relatively little-known and has never been translated into English. Rachilde, who was born Marguerite Vallette-Eymery (1860-1953), published the story in 1899. At this time, she was already well-known in Parisian literary circles as the author of several novels exploring non-conformist, fetishist, or obsessive sexuality, usually from the starting-point of a female protagonist. These early novels include those for which Rachilde is now best remembered, such as *Monsieur Vénus* (1884), in which a French noblewoman rejects her aristocratic male suitor in favour of a poor man whom she transforms into a 'wife', a culturally feminine figure, and *La Marquise de Sade* (1887), whose sadist female protagonist takes revenge on men for injustices she suffered as a child. These women, and those in many of Rachilde's novels of the 1880s and 1890s, seek escape through unusual or cruel sexual behaviour from the identity and sexuality that society imposes on them. In this sense, *La Tour d'amour* is different: its protagonist is a young man, and he is drawn into a world of depravity rather than creating his own depravity in order to escape from the bonds of conventional society. This difference sets it apart and could perhaps explain why the novel is frequently omitted from accounts of Rachilde's oeuvre, despite its quality.

In *La Tour d'amour*, Rachilde creates a world completely cut off from society, the lighthouse, where the narrator makes a series of disturbing discoveries. Rachilde roots the story in reality: the novel's lighthouse, the Ar-Men, is a real one, built during the 1870s and still standing today. Rachilde was greatly interested in the lighthouse's construction and in the practicalities and perils (both physical and psychological) of working there, including the immensely dangerous process of getting on and off it.¹ She uses this in the novel to emphasise the Ar-Men's otherworldly-nature and its separation from 'normal' life.

The novel is narrated by Jean Maleux, a young, naïve sailor who is appointed assistant keeper of the Ar-Men lighthouse. He is sent there to help old Mathurin Barnabas, the current keeper. Jean makes the crossing to the Ar-Men in stormy weather, and soon begins to find life there strange and troubling: Barnabas barely speaks, has forgotten how to read, never washes, and moves around the lighthouse in a crab-like crawl. Before long, a ship is wrecked nearby, and the bodies of the drowned begin to float by. Jean is horrified by Barnabas' indifference, and amazed

when the old man sets off in a rowing boat despite the continuing storm. The next morning, Jean glimpses something unusual in the water. The pale form turns out to be the body of a naked woman: Barnabas was not searching for survivors in his boat, but beautiful corpses, and he has fastened one there so that the sea can never take her away.

Time slips by, and Jean no longer thinks of visiting the mainland or of anything except his daily round of duties. One morning, after a storm, he climbs up the outside of the lighthouse to carry out repairs. Finding himself close to the window of Barnabas' secret room, he peers inside. A face looks out at him, a sad young woman with long, faded blonde hair. Jean loses his grip and falls into the sea, only just managing to pull himself back up onto the rocks.

When Jean recovers he goes on leave to Brest, where, drunk, he wanders down a dark alley, grasping his knife for protection. He hears footsteps and a woman comes up and whispers in his ear. This woman, who may or may not be Marie, a girl who has previously spurned him, kisses him with an 'abominable' kiss and embraces him 'like an octopus'. Jean drives his knife into her stomach, killing her. 'What of it?' he asks himself, 'I've killed the sea.'

Back at the lighthouse, tormented by guilt, Jean immerses himself in the numbing routine. Meanwhile, Barnabas falls ill. As he lies dying he makes one last request: that Jean should fetch 'her' for him, and he gives him the key to the secret room. Jean expects to see the woman he glimpsed previously, but instead finds but a jar with a woman's head inside it, preserved in alcohol, her long hair flowing out down the sides. Barnabas caresses the head and makes Jean throw it into the sea rather than allow another man to possess it.

Barnabas dies, and Jean must await the supply ship. The old man's body begins to decompose in the heat, but Jean does not throw it into the sea. When the ship finally comes, he is named chief lighthouse keeper and he vows 'before God, if he is listening' never to set foot on land again. The world of the Ar-Men closes around Jean: in it his distorted perception finds the home that he never previously had, and a refuge from the mainland, which is for him threatening, confusing and impossible to navigate.

Like most of Rachilde's novels, *La Tour d'amour* has never been translated into English: her work is not easily obtainable in French, and still less so in English translation. Recent translations by Melanie Hawthorne of *Monsieur Vénus* and *La Jongleuse* are still in print, but Liz Heron's translations of *La Marquise de Sade* and *Monsieur Vénus*, published by Dedalus in the 1990s, are unavailable now, although *La Marquise de Sade* is due to be re-issued in 2020.²

The extract translated here begins part-way through Chapter Six and goes on to the end of the chapter. It is the moment when Jean first discovers that the strange behaviour of Barnabas is much more sinister than he had previously thought. An English ship, the 'Dermond-Nestle', has

been wrecked not far from the lighthouse, and both men have been watching corpses float by, some narrowly missing a rocky reef known as the *Baleine*. As the extract opens, Jean is resting after having been on watch.

The accompanying woodcut image [fig. 1] was designed by Louis Jou (1881-1968) for a 1916 edition of the text, issued by the publisher Georges Crès et Cie. as part of the ‘Maîtres du livres’ series.



Fig. 1: Woodcut, designed by Louis Jou for Rachilde's *La Tour d'amour* (Paris: Georges Crès et Cie, 1916).

Extract from Chapter 6, *La Tour d'amour*³

Rachilde

Why the devil hadn't we seen a single woman float by?

At first this idea comforted me a little. I was reading *Paul and Virginie*, a lovely story where the woman is also drowned, towards the end. And I remembered the lady's long blonde hair (or was it brown? I can't really remember) stretched on the sand of the seashore when Paul ... Yes, that was why there were no women. Because we save women first, according to true French manners, and they travel less than men. They stay at home in the warm with their children close by, hiding in their skirts.

The book dropped from my hands.

And all of them waiting for their men on the jetties, over there!

I wouldn't have minded comforting one of them.

Oh, to have a sweet woman, a loving one, waiting for you, her pink mouth ready for a kiss on your return ...

'Like cats!'

And the old memory of the Moorish girl came back to me.

I'd seen her again on my second voyage to Malta, but she wasn't free, and she only gave me her photograph. The photograph that I kept so devotedly, even though it had been ruined by the Marseilles flies.

Oh, women!

I fell asleep, seeing things and sighing, and I had a strange dream.

I dreamed that a drowned woman ... who had the old man's hair, the way he wore it in the evening ...

Habit woke me just in time for my shift. I got up with difficulty.

'A foul dream', I said to myself, ashamed of the whole thing.

... But it had come in spite of me ... and really, in the *Ar-Men* lighthouse it couldn't happen any other way ...

'It's the tower of Love!' I sniggered to myself, wanting to make fun of my own weakness.

Lost in my thoughts about living in the *Tower of Love*, I suddenly realised that I hadn't heard the boss's usual refrain. Was he going to spend the whole night there on the edge of his staircase with his harpoon?

I did my round of the lamps and cleaned the glass, filthy with slimy water from the endless rain. From deep within the cave of rocks there rose a low roar: the water was letting out its hollow

moan, thrashing about in violent rage at its own powerlessness to demolish us ... The sea is delightful! Suddenly a new song began to rise, not spiralling up through the interior but coming from *outside*, from the waves. The old man was singing his song, off towards the *Baleine*, abeam the lighthouse, and he was *moving away* ...

I stood there for a moment, stunned, wondering if I wasn't losing my mind! Why, seeing all those carcasses going past all in one evening was enough to drive anyone a bit mad. The old man was going away, leaving the lighthouse, peacefully singing his accursed song.

'How's he getting away? In the rowing boat, by Jove!'

Then, in a flash, everything became clear. Perhaps he had seen a living soul, and was trying to save it.

A living soul around here, when the *Dermond-Nestle* was wrecked nine days ago?

'Hm! I must be deranged. You need to keep an eye on your boiler, my son. It's bubbling over, and all this solitude doesn't do you any good at all.'

Indeed, it was hard to imagine the predicament of someone who survived a shipwreck and landed on the back of the *Baleine*; he wouldn't last three hours there, standing up or sitting down. The only way you'd end up there would be if you were like a lump of soft cheese, a bundle of clothes that could no longer fight its destiny.

I leaned out, but the rain blurred the view in all directions, the lamps' rays were turning to yellow steam, and the reef emerged over two hundred metres away from us.

The witch's voice was still moving further away.

The old man's a good rower! I thought, resigned to accepting all his eccentricities.

At heart, I resented him for not having got the boat out on the evening of the catastrophe. That would have been the natural thing to do.

I kept watch for the rest of that dismal night, presuming I would never see Mathurin Barnabas again.

The next day, at breakfast, my boss sat down in front of a bowl of hot soup that I'd had the audacity to prepare without consulting him.

He had returned from his nocturnal roam, not without difficulty, by all appearances! Ah, the poor old man, such a sad face! He really was sulking! His head was sunk between his shoulders, his eyes were bleary, his cheeks were the colour of wax, his hands trembled, and his whole demeanour was dirtier and shiftier than usual, a clear sign that his rescue hadn't been successful.

He ate his soup greedily, drank a glass of his tafia,⁴ then went to bed, mute as a fish.

For two days he kept his mouth shut, doing his rounds like a clock that chimes because it's been wound up.

Now that the dead weren't paying us any more visits, I arranged to take leave the next time the provisions boat came. My replacement was at the ready on the *Saint Christophe's* poop deck. He would disembark, swinging from the hoist, and I'd be off.

I'd be carrying my notes about the loss of the English ship, a long list of tins of food, a record of plank numbers and details of lots of drowned people.

I was bursting with pride at having such a solemn mission. Misfortune dictated that I should spoil this little moment by playing about with a little telescope up there on the gallery.

It was the day before I was set to depart. I was examining the area around the *Baleine* curiously. The day was quite clear, the swell was calmer, and a warm breeze, a spring breeze, had paused to let the waves warm up.

It would start up again, of course, for bad weather is also a habit that the sky never gives up, but just at that moment there was a breathing space.

I focused my telescope.

There was a white smudge on the reef's dark back.

It was a long back, several metres, rather like the keel of a boat upturned by a hurricane, a shiny sealskin.

Not a tuft of algae, not a blade of grass, not even a grain of sand stuck in a crevice. Just smooth rock, polished by the water since the beginning of time.

Across it, a livid body.

... Yes, a corpse spread-eagled there, legs to one side, arms to the other, and the swell swishing a sort of brown drapery around its head.

The body was completely naked.

I don't know why I felt suddenly feverish, seeing it naked.

It was so white, so pure, its bobbin shape so pretty.

'It's a woman!' I cried.

The brown drapery? ... hair ... very long, loose hair. A woman with no lifebelt, she was. A young woman decomposing in the warm June sun.

I wanted to cry and ...

I wanted to laugh, the nasty laugh of a boy mocking the shame of naked girls.

I ran down the spiral staircase to find the old man.

He was on his way to prepare the docking crane, the supply boat being expected at any moment. He pulled his hat down over his ears and made his way towards the esplanade, bent double, a bird of prey dragging its tattered wings along the rocks. His harpoon trailed behind him like a long, bald tail.

I brought him up short:

‘Captain!’

‘What now?’ he growled, with a start.

‘There’s another body on the back of the *Baleine*. *It’s the other sex this time!*’

I don’t know what the old man must have heard in my voice, but it stopped him in his tracks.

He straightened up suddenly, and he seemed very tall, not his usual, hunched self, and his eyes flashed, lighting up his pale face as he gesticulated madly, pointing his harpoon at my chest:

‘Oh yes, there’s a woman out there all right. And she needs to be left there, my boy.’

‘The ebb tide will catch her and bring her round to us this evening, Monsieur Barnabas; in any case, we’ll find no clues on this one, she’s naked from her head to her toes, the poor lady.’

‘The tide’ll bring us nothing at all.’

‘Why not? It’s funny it hasn’t done it already. It’s been three days ...’

‘What of it?’

I waited. I had my reasons. He was still threatening me with his harpoon, and as I gazed at him he seemed to change colour.

Finally the terrible weapon fell from his hands.

‘You saw me that evening in the boat, didn’t you?’

‘Yes, I saw you, Monsieur Barnabas. So brave ... when it was too late to save anybody!’

‘She was dead’, he whispered, in a wrecked voice, ‘so no harm looking.’

‘She was naked, too ... It’s hard to believe she hasn’t been washed off the reef ...’

As I asked my questions, I seemed to be explaining things to myself. All sorts of dark things.

‘What of it?’ he sniggered, caught in my trap and stunned by the scream of the siren announcing the supply boat. ‘You’re not thinking of denouncing me? I’d have saved her if she’d been alive, poor little minx. But she’s nearly rotten ... so ... *what did it matter? ... I fixed her there with two hooks.*’

‘You filthy pig!’

We stood there facing one another, paler than all the drowned corpses in the sea.

We’d understood each other at last ...

The *Saint-Christophe*, belching out steam, turned its left side round to us and called out with the loud hailer, as it always did.

Without a word, our arms moving as one, like labourers who always worked together, we threw out the buoy. The pass rope was caught and attached to the hoist, and the crane was lowered, as the little steam boat let off white jets and whistled loud enough to burst our eardrums.

‘Ho! Hoist! Hoist! Hoist up!’

With one co-ordinated movement, we heaved on the cable.

‘Hoist up! Hoist! Hoist! Ho!’

The parcel of provisions came over, then the man replacing me, another parcel wrapped in tar cloth that we had to dry out and cheer up with a glass of rum that *I gave* him myself.

And then it was my turn. I dangled from the hoist and flew over to the *Saint-Christophe*, where I was met by a friendly bunch.

I could tell them, in all truthfulness, that I hadn’t seen a human being for six months.

I cried with joy.

That made the officer smile.

¹ Édith Silve, Préface, *La Tour d’amour* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1994).

² Rachilde, *Monsieur Vénus: Roman matérialiste*, trans. by Melanie C. Hawthorne and Liz Constable (New York: Modern Language Association, 2004); *The Juggler*, trans. by Melanie C. Hawthorne (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990); *La Marquise de Sade*, trans. by Liz Heron (Sawtry, Cambs: Dedalus, 1994); and *Monsieur Vénus*, trans. by Liz Heron (Sawtry, Cambs: Dedalus, 1992).

³ Rachilde’s original italics have been retained throughout.

⁴ Tafia is a West Indian rum made from sugarcane juice.