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Isabelle Eberhardt, 'Infernal: Sepulchral Pleasure' (1895):  
A New Translation

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Swiss writer Isabelle Wilhelmine Marie Eberhardt (1877-1904) was born out of wedlock: the daughter of German-Russian Nathalie de Moerder (*née* Eberhardt), who was married at the time, and her children's tutor, Alexander Trophimowsky, an Armenian anarchist and nihilist who converted to Islam. As a child, Isabelle Eberhardt received an extensive education and learned several languages. Raised on an equal footing with her brothers, she learned how to ride horses, and shoot firearms, and she took part in all the chores around the house; she wore boys' clothes and kept her hair short. Always encouraged to question and transgress gender roles, Eberhardt grew to reject the submissive role women had been assigned by society and strove to escape the confines of her sex.

Spellbound by the novels of Pierre Loti and nineteenth-century Orientalism, she settled in Algeria with her mother in 1897, converted to Islam and joined the Qadriya brotherhood of Sufis. Disguised as an Arab man, calling herself Si Mahmoud Saâdi, her head shaved and wearing men's clothing, the 'Androgyne du Désert' identified with men more than women, and felt free to enjoy countless erotic adventures. Even though she married Slimène Ehnni, an Algerian officer in the colonial army, in 1900, she refused domestic life. Sadly, Eberhardt's life was cut short when she was killed in a flash flood that swept her home in 1904.

None of Eberhardt's work, aside from her journalism, was published during her lifetime. Even though her mother tongue was Russian, she wrote in French. Today, Eberhardt is most famously known for her anti-colonial writings, denouncing the alienating effects of the French presence in North Africa on the colonized. The short story translated here, 'Infernal: Volupté sépulcrale' ['Infernal: Sepulchral Pleasure'], was written when Eberhardt was only 18 years old, and appeared on 15 September 1895 in the *Nouvelle Revue moderne* under the male pseudonym of

Nicolas Podolinsky. It tells the story of a medical student's sexual attraction for a dead woman waiting to be dissected for the advancement of medicine.

Nineteenth-century scholars might be familiar with the plethora of Francophone decadent texts dealing with the subject of love for and with the dead. The motif of necrophilia remained mostly within the domain of male writers: works by Théophile Gautier, Guy de Maupassant, Jules Laforgue, Charles Baudelaire, Jean Lorrain, and Jean Richepin, among others, described men's relationships with female corpses, ghosts, and vampires. Eberhardt, quoting Richepin at the beginning of her short story, clearly stresses her desire to become part of this masculine legacy. Yet, 'Infernal' has remained largely forgotten. This feminine version of love with and for the dead needs more critical attention as it brings to light something Eberhardt's male counterparts never did: the dead woman's feelings about this forceful encounter.

### **Translator's Note**

Eberhardt's style is very Baudelairean – poetic and dark – and her syntax is overall a bit stilted, with sudden shifts in focus and tone. The meaning can be ambiguous at times. This translation tries to preserve these idiosyncrasies as much as possible in order to retain the obscure and poetic feeling of the text, its authenticity and uniqueness, as it is *her* story, and this is the way she chose to write it. Though, as the tempo picks up – as if pacing along with the young medical student's heartbeat – the awkwardness of the phrasing seems to disappear as the reader feverishly runs through to the ending of the story.

## Infernal: Sepulchral Pleasure

Isabelle Eberhardt

To Ahmed ben Arslan *In memoriam*

Love without end, loves innumerable,  
Love for nameless objects,  
Love for a dream, love for a shadow,  
This is always love. Love!

Love! In your pure eyes  
These ever-rekindled flickers  
Are the quick sparks  
Of eternal flame. Love!

J. Richepin, *The Islands of Gold*

In the silence of the night, the large room, gloomy and barely lit, was half-asleep...  
From the dreadful tables, from the soiled floors, rose a mild smell – the smell of human entrails, of clotted blood, of spilled drugs...

In this scent of misery, in this painful room, two cadavers, covered by a white shroud, sinister cloth of horror, were sleeping on two tables.

Next to the bare wall, the wall of a hospital or a prison, of an asylum or a fire station, a man was lying under his tragic sheet, forever still, his eyes closed, now in eternal indifference. Very young, maybe 20 years old; the profile of a white statue, very soft, his pallid lips barely smiling on his livid face, a smile from beyond the grave...

In the opposite corner, a woman was also lying under the sheet of the wretched.

A mystical and pure image, with the pale, transcendental beauty of a martyr...

In the blueish shadow of her black hair, still and white, her voluptuous flesh stiffened by the cold of death, she was/is forever foreign to passionate embraces, to burning kisses.

With its perfect curves, her rigid shape lifted the vile shroud...

And the dimmed flame of the gas light cast bloody shadows on the sinister kingdom of dark death.

In the heavy silence, in the nauseating smell, the nameless corpses, both young and beautiful, were sleeping a frightening sleep...

They still had their human shape, but, in the mortuary room, they did not matter... They *existed* not, forever erased from the count of human lives.

Two wretched creatures crushed by destiny, brought down by vice; fleeting passers-by, they had landed here. Tomorrow, under the cold scalpel, torn to shreds, disgracefully skinned, their entrails made bare, they would show to other young men and women, eager to live, to know and to love, their ripped organs, their miserable and bloody lifeless bodies, their only possession, undoubtedly, during their lifetime, now forever forgotten...

They would display their ultimate misery to the great, indifferent sun – to the sun in its eternal joy...

It is of no concern!

In the great mystery of Eternal life, how would one regret sacrificed blood, life, and flesh?

And tomorrow, all those who would dip their young and warm hands in this frozen blood, in this butchered flesh, would later try and ease the pain of their pitiful brethren, and one day, they would try to appease the loud scream brought on by Unending life!

And then, eventually, they would also roll around, suddenly still and frozen, in the same shapeless, timeless and nameless Nothingness...

And so on, forever...

They were lying in the strange rays of the waning light...

And there, close to them, the immobile deceased, a living man was fighting against the dark, unknown forces of his being's miserable depths, forces that were about to overcome him, annihilate him...

Next to the miserable bed where the pallid woman was lying, stood a student, on duty at the clinic.

He was looking at her, his flesh aroused by dreadful desires.

His pale face, with his tormented dark eyes, was shivering with cold chills...

With all his might, with all the energy of his youth, he was trying to resist, fighting against the sinister calls of neurosis...

But, mesmerized and still, he could no longer escape; his lethargic flesh was weakening by the minute, a prey to deadly horror, his heart seized by revulsion...

He felt powerless at the thought of the monstrous embrace he madly desired.

And he would soon give in...

His suffering was intolerable in this cruel night...

His virility rebelled against the revolting coitus; he wanted to run away...

And yet he remained still, his forehead drenched in sweat, his fists clenched...

He felt strong and handsome; he knew he was very young and wholly male. And his pride was aroused at the thought of this deadly sham of love which, so many times before, had dragged him into the unspeakable abyss of pleasure.

Nauseated, he was trying to chase away the obscure fantasy born of his neurosis which, tonight, in front of this woman whose frozen curves he could see without any reserve under the soft sheet, in front of this horrible chimera, was prevailing, enslaving him.

With all his energy, with all his chastity that was being silenced yet still alive in him, he was trying to displace his crazed desire of possession onto a living woman – *any* living woman...

But all the images brought on by his memory, by the violent tension of his will, were insipid, impersonal..., whereas, just looking at this one – the dead woman – his young flesh quivered, swooned, wilted, in spite of himself.

Contemplating this degeneration, his face became flushed by shame... He despised and hated himself in this agonizing hour.

His gaze rested on the curved lines the funereal sheet made along the body. And he knew, he could see through it.

But he could not resist wanting to see it without filter.

And so, he gave in to this desire, though still fighting against the *other* who he knew to be perverse and vile...

With his hand, which was shaking uncontrollably, he removed the sheet and looked at this pitiful nakedness offered to his indecent eyes.

So then, he felt like he was about to swoon, he felt a long quiver from the depth of his triumphant flesh...

And he flung himself onto the white corpse, squeezed it in a wild and painful embrace, clenching his teeth, shivering with a horrifying fever ...

When he took her, without even feeling her coldness, he sensed an ultimate pleasurable chill.

He embraced her again and again with all his strength, feeling her alive, burning, crazed by his touch, pressing against his quivering flesh, with the lustfulness and softness of a warm and tender passive lover...

He let out a crazed grunt of pleasure, the triumphant cry, the great alleluia of almighty neurosis.

And the more this frenzied, wholly wild male embraced her, the more he felt her live, and quiver under his crazed touch.

He violently pressed his lips on the lips of his lover-ghost, the indifferent dead woman, until he felt pain.

Once again, the same sensual quiver shook his entire body.

With eyes widened by pleasure, his head was resting softly, languidly, on the dead woman's chest.

And the woman, *distant*, inanimate, indifferent to the passionate touch of the male who was possessing her in spite of death, was still lying, her face turned towards the ceiling that was covered with indistinct shadows.

Her dead eyes remained shut, without expressing any joy or pain, during this monstrous coitus; in the powerful embrace of the living, she remained more passive than any other lover would ever be.

In the pale dawn of a spring day, on her bed of blood and love, the dead woman and her sleeping lover were lying: she, forever at peace, already swept away into the dark unknown; he, meant to whirl about for a few more years in the impersonal turmoil of Eternal life...

## Infernalìa: Volupté sèpulcrale

Isabelle Eberhardt

À Ahmed ben Arslan *In memoriam*

Amour sans fin, amours sans nombre.  
Amours aux objets innomés,  
Amour d'un rêve, amour d'une ombre,  
C'est toujours de l'amour. Aimez !

Aimez ! Dans vos regards limpides  
Ces éclairs toujours rallumés  
Sont les étincelles rapides  
De la flamme éternelle. Aimez !

J. Richepin, *Les Iles d'Or*.

Dans le silence nocturne, la grande salle morne, à peine éclairée, vaguement dormait...  
Des tables infâmes, du plancher souillé, montait une odeur fade – une odeur d'entrailles humaines, de sang caillé, de drogues répandues...

En ce parfum de misère, en cette salle douloureuse, sur deux tables, deux cadavres dormaient, couverts de linceuls blancs, sinistres vêtements d'épouvante.

Près du mur nu, mur d'hôpital ou de prison, d'asile ou de caserne, sous son drap lamentable, un homme était couché, figé à jamais, les yeux clos, en son indifférence désormais éternelle. Très jeune, vingt ans peut-être ; le profil de statue blanche, très doux, les lèvres blêmes à peine souriantes dans la face livide, d'un sourire d'outre-tombe...

Au coin opposé, une femme étendue, elle aussi, sous le drap des misérables.

Une image mystique et pure, en sa transcendantale beauté pâle de martyr...

Sous l'ombre bleuâtre des cheveux noirs, une blancheur immobile, la chair voluptueuse raidie dans le froid de la mort, étrangère désormais aux étreintes ardentes, aux baisers enflammés.

La forme rigide soulevait le voile infâme de son galbe parfait...

Et sur ce règne sinistre de la mort ténébreuse, la flamme baissée du gaz jetait ses reflets sanglants.

Dans le silence pesant, dans l'odeur nauséuse, jeunes tous deux et beaux, les cadavres sans nom dormaient de leur sommeil d'épouvante...

Ils avaient encore gardé la forme humaine, mais, dans la salle mortuaire, eux ne comptaient pas... Ils *n'étaient* pas, rayés à jamais du nombre des êtres.

Misérables écrasés par la destinée, terrassés par le vice ; passants inconnus d'une heure, ils étaient venus échouer ici. Demain, sous le scalpel froid, déchiquetés, honteusement dépouillés, leurs entrailles nues, ils allaient montrer à d'autres jeunes hommes, à d'autres jeunes femmes, avides de vivre, de savoir et d'aimer, leurs organes déchirés, leur misérable loque sanglante, leur seul bien, sans doute, durant leurs vies à jamais ignorées...

Ils allaient étaler leur misère ultime au grand soleil indifférent – au soleil en sa joie éternelle...

Qu'importe !

Dans la grande énigme du Devenir éternel, comment regretter le sang, la vie, la chair sacrifiés ?

Et tous ceux qui, demain, allaient tremper leurs mains, jeunes et chaudes, dans ce sang glacé, dans cette chair mutilée, après, ils iraient essayer de soulager un peu la douleur de leurs frères pitoyables, essayer d'apaiser un jour le grand hurlement qu'arrache le Devenir incessant !

Ensuite, eux aussi allaient rouler, inertes soudain et glacés, dans le même Néant sans forme, sans durée et sans nom...

Et ainsi, toujours...

Ils gisaient dans le rayonnement étrange de la lumière faiblissante...

Et là, près d'eux, trépassés immobiles, un vivant luttait contre les sombres forces inconnues des en-dessous ténébreux de son être, qui allaient le dompter, l'anéantir...

Près de la couche misérable où gisait la femme livide, un étudiant, de garde à la clinique, se tenait debout.

Il la regardait, la chair soulevée d'un désir effroyable.

Sa face pâle, aux yeux noirs angoissés, se convulsait de frissons glacés...

De toute sa volonté, de toute son énergie jeune, il résistait, luttant contre les appels sinistres de la névrose...

Mais il ne pouvait plus s'enfuir, fasciné, immobile ; la chair alanguie, faiblissant d'instant en instant, en proie à une épouvante mortelle, le cœur soulevé de dégoût...

Il se sentait sans force en face de l'étreinte hideuse qu'il désirait follement.

Et il allait céder bientôt...

Sa souffrance était intolérable en cette nuit cruelle...

Sa virilité se révoltait contre le coït abominable ; sa volonté était de fuir...

Et il restait immobile, le front trempé de sueur, les poings serrés...

Il se sentait fort et beau ; il se savait très jeune et mâle tout à fait. Et sa fierté se soulevait à la pensée de ce simulacre funèbre de l'amour qui, tant de fois déjà, l'avait entraîné dans les abîmes ineffables de la volupté.

Il chassait, écœuré, l'obscur fantasmagorie née de sa névrose qui, ce soir, en face de cette femme dont ses yeux voyaient sans pudeur la forme glacée sous le drap mou, en face de l'horrible chimère, triomphait, l'avalissant.

Il essayait de toute son énergie, de toute la chasteté déjà inconsciente, mais encore vivante qui était en lui, de reporter son désir délirant de possession sur une femme vivante – n'importe laquelle...

Mais toutes les images qu'évoquait sa mémoire, sous la tension violente de sa volonté, étaient pâles, impersonnelles..., tandis qu'à la vue de celle-ci – la morte – sa chair jeune frémissait, se pâmait, s'alanguissait malgré lui.

Le rouge de la honte, en face de la déchéance, lui monta au visage... Il se méprisait lui-même et se haïssait en cette heure torturante.

Son regard glissa sur le soulèvement du drap funèbre, au-dessus du corps. Et il savait, il voyait à travers.

Mais il voulut voir en réalité, invinciblement.

Alors, à ce désir, il céda, luttant pourtant toujours contre *l'autre* qu'il savait morbide et infâme...

De sa main qui tremblait violemment, il enleva le drap et regarda cette nudité lamentable qui s'étalait à ses yeux impudiques.

Alors il se sentit défaillir, il eut un long tressaillement jusqu'au plus profond de sa chair triomphante...

Et il tomba sur le cadavre blanc, le serra d'une étreinte sauvage, douloureuse, les dents serrées, frissonnant en sa fièvre horrible...

Quand il l'eut prise, ne sentant même pas sa froideur, il eut un frisson de volupté ultime.

De toute sa force il l'étreignait encore et encore, la sentant vivante, brûlante, folle sous ses caresses à lui, se serrer contre sa chair palpitante, lascive et molle en sa chaleur douce d'amante passive...



Il eut un râle furieux de volupté, le cri triomphant, le grand alleluia de la névrose toute-puissante.

Et lui, enragé, en mâle sauvage tout à fait, plus il l'étreignait, plus il la sentait vivre, tressaillir sous ses caresses folles.

Il pressa violemment, jusqu'à la douleur, ses lèvres sur celles de son amante-fantôme, de la trépassée insensible.

De nouveau, le même frisson voluptueux secoua tout son corps.

Sa tête, aux yeux élargis par la jouissance, reposait mollement, languide, sur la poitrine de la morte.

Et celle-ci, *lointaine*, inanimée, insensible à ces caresses ardentes du mâle qui la possédait malgré la mort, restait toujours étendue, la face tournée vers le plafond noyé d'ombres vagues.

Ses yeux morts restaient clos, et sans joie et sans douleur, en ce coït monstrueux ; elle reposait plus passive qu'aucune amante ne le sera jamais, sous l'étreinte puissante de l'être vivant.

Au lever pâle du jour printanier, sur sa couche de sang et d'amour, la trépassée et son amant endormi reposaient : elle, tranquille à jamais, envolée déjà vers l'inconnu ténébreux ; lui, destiné à tournoyer encore quelques années durant dans le tourbillon impersonnel du Devenir éternel...