

Grey Souls by Philippe Claudel, translated from the French by Adriana Hunter
(Weidenfeld and Nicholson)

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The somewhat bleak title of this novel is by no means misleading: this is a tale of loss, disillusionment, emptiness. That it is not unbearably depressing is a tribute to the writing, which, even in translation, is lucid, luminous and precisely crafted.

In this exquisite and haunting novel Philippe Claudel recreates in brilliant detail life in a small French village in the early years of the First World War. The village is situated a few kilometres from the front: the inhabitants can hear the guns, and new recruits pass through the village, to return, if they return at all, wounded, maimed, disfigured. The villagers themselves, however, are protected from the war by a sheltering hill; and they are spared its decimation by a factory which, deemed essential by the powers that be, grants its workers exemption from conscription.

The narrator, who remains nameless, is an investigating officer, a somewhat vague designation for an ill-defined job: he investigates crimes without, apparently, having very much power to pursue his findings. The real power is in the hands of Mierck, the bestial judge, and Destinat, the aloof, aristocratic public prosecutor. The fact that they detest each other seems not to interfere with their efficiency in prosecuting criminals and sentencing them to death.

An apparently unrelated strand of the tale concerns a young woman, Lilia Verhareine, who appears mysteriously one day, and offers her services as teacher. The town takes the gentle, beautiful young woman to its heart, and she is given lodgings in the garden of Destinat's chateau. She transforms the lives not only of the scholars, but of Destinat himself, who finds in her in her a reincarnation of his wife Clélia, who died when they were both young, and whose youthful portrait hangs in the gloomy chateau, unchanged by time: "Death robs us of beautiful things, but preserves them. That is its power. We cannot fight it"

Lilia, it eventually transpires, is in the village only because, unlike the villagers themselves, there she feels close to the war, in which her lover is fighting. When a letter arrives informing her of the death of her lover, Lilia hangs herself, and Destinat suffers his second mortal deprivation.

The main story, intricately related to the death of Lilia, revolves around "the *Affaire*", the murder of a ten-year old girl called Belle de jour, who is found strangled next to the canal that runs through the village. From nowhere a dandified army officer, Matzjev, appears, nominally to take charge of the investigation, but in fact to spend his days and nights with Mierck eating and drinking.

Josephine, the local dealer in animal skins, claims that on the evening of the murder she had seen the girl talking to Destinat close to the spot where the body was found. When the narrator brings her to Mierck and Matzjev to tell her tale, they ridicule and humiliate her and lock her up as a trouble-maker. Much as Mierck hates Destinat, he cannot contemplate the possibility of his having murdered: "Some things are stronger than hate. . . Destinat and Mierck belonged to the same world, the world of the well-born . . . Believing that one of your own kind could be a murderer is like believing that you yourself could be."

When two deserters from the war are caught in the village, Mierck and Matziev make it their business to “prove” that they had strangled the girl. The one deserter, a worldly-wise Parisian, commits suicide; the other, a peasant from Breton is tortured until he confesses: “In one night, Mierck and Matziev had created a madman, and a perfect and consenting criminal, out of one little peasant.”

The narrator confesses that on the day of Belle’s death he was a happy man: his young wife, Clémence, was at home, about to give birth to their first child. But while he and Josephine are being detained at the malicious leisure of Mierck and Matziev, Clémence was going into premature labour and bleeding to death. The narrator now is able to empathise with Destinac and with Lilia, in a loss which robs life of its meaning: “I have been dead for a long time. I pretend that I am alive, but my sentence has been deferred, that’s all.”

The importance attached to a single death in the midst of the wholesale slaughter of war contains an irony that is not lost on the narrator. Indeed, part of the book’s point is the essential selfishness of human love, in its willingness to consent to the sacrifice of thousands in order to safeguard the loved even to murder another human being for the crime of not being the loved one. “And I too,,” confesses the narrator, “ would have killed to have Clémence back”

Who killed Belle de jour? We never know: we are given two different explanations, both equally plausible. The mystery, the narrator tells us, is not why we die but why we are born: “Do we ever find out why we come into the world, and why we stay in it?.”

It is left to Josephine, the dealer in animal skins, to pronounce the moral that gives the book its title: “Bastards, saints . . . I’ve never met one or the other. Nothing’s black or white. And it’s the same with souls. You’re a grey soul, like the rest of us.”

This moral, like the novel itself, offers little consolation, other than the humble decency of which many of these grey souls are nevertheless capable: the doctor who starves to death because he will not take fees from his poor patients, the priest with a passion for flowers, the aristocratic widow who gives up everything to nurse soldiers in the local hospital. That the decency is almost entirely ineffectual deepens its pathos but does not detract from its dignity.