

## THE SCREAM

Hugo Claus **De Verwondering** (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1962), translated from the Dutch by Michael Heim as **Wonder** (Brooklyn, New York: Archipelago Books, 2009)



Late in 2009 Archipelago publisher Jill Schoolman sent me a copy of their translation Hugo Claus' important fiction, *Wonder*. It wasn't until March of 2010 that I could get a chance to begin reading it, and I finished it only in early April.

Like the other fictions and poems by Claus (who died in 2008) *Wonder* is an extraordinarily powerful and original work. With its numerous shifts in time and tense—often within the space of few paragraphs—and in its uses of dialect and an internal, almost privatized language, *Wonder*, as I confessed to my friend, Michael Heim, the translator of the book, must have been nearly impossible to translate. "Claus writes brilliantly," he observed, "and he writes like no other writer." I might have even gone further and declared Claus' writing as somewhat eccentric, in the positive sense of that word.

Indeed. Even the story of this wondrous work is

purposely as strange as story can get. A middle-aged school-teacher, bored with the bourgeois proprieties of his job and the mediocrity of his peers and superiors, is slowly moving toward a mental shutdown. Despite a life of subservience to all and impeccable obedience, he has sex with one of his underage students and soon after carefully arranges to marry her. But the young girl, predictably, is frustrated with her life with the confused pedant, and soon after leaves him.

On the day in which the fiction begins the teacher, Victor-Denijs de Rijckel is asked by the principal to introduce him that evening at a lecture he is giving on "the function of classical music in our society" to the Association for Flemish Culture Friends of Music. Unpredictably, de Rijckel

misses this event, instead wandering, somewhat drunkenly, into the midst of the hundreds of revelers come to town for the annual costumed White Rabbit Ball. There he passively watches and speaks to a beautiful woman who ends the evening walking into the ocean along the beach, doing a kind of dance in the moonlit waves.

Claus' fiction moves suddenly into a future time, where de Rijckel is evidently locked away in a house where he is recovering from the mental breakdown by, in part, keeping a daily journal. But we quickly discover the facts behind this breakdown as Claus, almost like a magician drawing a rabbit out of a hat, introduces the teacher to a young male student who has evidently witnessed de Rijckel's behavior at the ball, and tells the teacher that he knows where the mysterious woman of the night before lives. Before the reader can even assimilate this strange encounter, the two are off by train to a small village, where the young woman, Alesandra Harmedam, lives in a castle.



Neither teacher nor his unusually clever guide know what they intend to do if they can reencounter the woman. And as they take stock of the situation, it appears that the castle, backed by a series of strange sculptures, is highly fortified; they escape their foray with their lives, retreating to a nearby inn, where the teacher pretends he is the boy's uncle.

On the second day, they take a more conventional approach and are greeted as if they were expected, even toured about the place. Soon we realize that the castle is preparing for a significant gathering of supporters of an obscure Flanders wartime figure, Crabbe, who, siding with the Nazi's, fought a kind individual war based on nationalist beliefs. De Rijckel and the boy are thought to be a doctor and his son from the Netherlands come for the event, and, accordingly, Alesandra readily entertains them. Yet suspicions are clearly aroused by some of de Rijckel's comments, and a former aide to Crabbe, Sprange, who lives at the castle, looms as a fearful skeptic.

The local villagers who visit of the bar at the inn each evening are suddenly suspicious of the new guests, particularly since they are now associated with the Harmedams and Sprange; and when it is revealed by the hotelier that they are not father and son, but uncle and nephew, their suspicions turn prurient. The boy is forced to sleep in the hall.

Strangely de Rijckel's sexual instincts seem to have been right; Alesandra is attracted to him as the two clumsily engage in sex. But the teacher's instincts for self-survival diminish as he loses his glasses which blurs his vision. Intellectually, he dangerously toys with the now-gathered fanatics of Crabbe and his ideas. Before long they reveal that they know he is a pretender, threatening him with death. De Rijckel and the boy attempt escape, with the both the figures from the castle and the villagers, angry with him for other reasons, chasing the two down in a cornfield where they are hiding.

The house where he is now incarcerated is apparently where Sprange, after torturing him, has taken de Rijckel, who is so incapacitated by events that he even allows other inmates to piss upon him in the small derelict nook wherein he sleeps.

In many senses, Claus' story, in short, is so absurd, so illogical that the reader really does not have a sense of any one truth, much the way the Flanders locals had no coherent picture of the war. Villagers clearly lived out the war supporting any side that seemed momentarily about to win, sometimes even hiding Jews and others from the Nazis less out of principle than financial gain or plain stubbornness. And there is also in Claus' preposterous plot a great deal of humor, just as there is the dark and dangerous activities of Crabbe, who believed in principles so confused that is hard to understand whether he is a mad fanatic or a ridiculous hero.

Like Flanders during the war, de Rijckel ends this fiction so confused that even his escape from his confines is half-hearted, and he is returned to imprisonment, weakly imagining alternatives: "I was thinking of phoning the principal from the telephone booth by the Hazegras Bridge as soon as I went out. I would have told him I was alive and hoped he had cancer or polio. And I might have gone to school afterwards as if nothing happened. Nothing. No boy."

That, so Claus suggests, is just the problem. There is no outrage in the society—for anything or anyone. There is no righteousness, no fury. Things simply happen, and even the strangest of events are unflappably assimilated.

We in our country of two hundred and ten airplanes and two submarines, we work hard and have a good reputation abroad—ask anyone—because we are flexible in our transactions and give our all. On Saturdays we'll go for a spin in our big American cars (ninety percent of which, my good man, are brought on credit) to the coast, our coast. We study the rim of West Flanders that lies on the sea. ...Circumstances, if we are to be believed, are in the hands of others....

Yet this little man who has so willingly engaged the catastrophes that have befallen him, finally does act; ultimately he rises again, if nothing else, to explore his own imprisonment; and in the process and despite possible punishment, de Rijckel lets out a long righteous scream against the perverted Ensor-like landscape surrounding him:

A gray-haired mother sitting on a terrace opposite the esplanade said to her son, "Did you hear that, darling?"

Her son, though fully grown, was wearing shorts. He was in a wheelchair, and saliva dripped from his lips onto his pink, hairy thighs.

"No, no, no!" he said, swinging his heavy head. She carefully dabbed his lips.

*Los Angeles, April 17, 2010*

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