

1942 and 1945: The apocalypse of Henri Bosco

Introduction

Henri Bosco is a French novelist (1881-1976), born in Avignon, whose works are essentially referring to his native ground, and especially the “Lubéron”. Despite his fame (or because of his fame), he has always been considered like a sort of *anthropological* poet. But his interest in his own country is based on its hidden mysteries: the survival of an ageless tradition, that is to say the hidden root of religions. In 1942, Bosco publishes in Casablanca, where he teaches classical letters, his translation of the Apocalypse, in the Greek text of the Vulgate. This work was followed in 1945 by his novel (which according to him was not for children!) *The Child and the River* [*L'Enfant et la rivière*], published in Algiers (at the same time as in Paris). The influence of the Apocalypse in *The Child and the River* is both thematic and structural; we do not count in this little novel the transpositions of the key details of the sacred book. It can be said that Bosco, a metaphysical poet, translated the Apocalypse twice, first in his literality, then in writing *The Child and the River*, where the key details of the sacred book are transposed. *The Child and the River*, this re-invented apocalypse, was probably for Bosco the poetic exorcism of the political climate of the year 1945 (likewise for its Apocalypse, translated in 1942).

The writing of *The Child and the River* is characterized by a generalized “alchemy of the verb”,¹ affecting all levels of the text: a diversified practice of the oxymoron, adapted to the unitary myth that Bosco was conscious of illustrating in his stories. No less significant, the construction in three chapters of this particular story; the middle chapter, titled “The backwaters”, expressing the balance inherent in the quest that is first that of the young hero, in his passion for the dark Gatz, the wild child. One can see in this sentimental alchemy an allegory of the literary project of the poet dedicated to the One (or the divine Word). Now, the influence of the Apocalypse in *The Child and the River* is not only thematic. The balanced bill of this story of Bosco is close to the building of the Apocalypse, which consists of twenty-two chapters, centered on the evocation of the double beast, in chapters 11 and 13.

Incarnation of harmful duality, this Beast disputes its axial position to the “two witnesses of the Lord”, mentioned at the beginning of chapter 11. These two witnesses, with their torchlight have “power to close the sky, so that it does not fall of rain, [...] power on the water [...] to hit the earth”.² This power revives in the benefit that the two protagonists of *The Child and the river* draw from their experience: “Water, earth, fire and air were revealed to us.”³ The miraculous catch which in the same passage is the pretext for this revelation, is read as a positive reversal of the announced sacrifice of the two witnesses, victims of the Beast “rising from the abyss” In verse 7 of Rev. 11 (this is an aquatic abyss, that of the beast of the sea, seconded in chapter 13 by the beast of the earth).

¹Bosco, who only follows his poetic instinct in this process, refers with ambiguous irony to Rimbaud in one of his first novels (see M. Arouimi, *Vivre Rimbaud selon Ramuz et Bosco*, Paris: Orizons, 2010).

²I quote here the photocopied tapuscrit of the book published in Casablanca in 1942 (Derche Gallery ed.).

³Henri Bosco, *L'Enfant et la rivière*, Gallimard [Folio], 1999 [1953], p. 67.

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The beast

The description of the Beast of the Sea, at the beginning of Ap. 13, is in fact transposed into that of the monster imagined by the two children, in the middle of the middle chapter. This griffin us monster embodies the most hidden aspects of their mutual passion: the mutual desire, and especially the danger of antagonism, finely suggested in various passages where it is always surmounted; a danger of which the Beast, creature of the rival Satan of the Lord, is a mythical figure. The Racal “akin to lions, [to] tigers, can frighten the fighting bull and differs from animals known to everyone”. Like the Beast, the Racal to whom nothing is “similar and that no one can combat”. These physical and behavioral characteristics of the Racal, which both boys invent the name, evoke those of the Beast of the sea: “she had blasphemous names. And this beast I saw was like the leopard. She had feet like a bear; like a lion, the mouth. The Dragon gave his strength and great power. [...] Seizure of admiration, all the earth followed the Beast [...] saying: “Who is like this Beast? And who can fight against it?” (Capital letters are those of Bosco typescript).

The simple visual notations, in the testimony of Pascalet: “we thought we saw him [...] you saw a Racal”, evoke the similar verbs at the beginning of Ap. 13: “And I live [...] a Beast. [...] and this Beast that I live [...]”, etc. Pascalet remembers: “we discussed it for a long time. We made him legs, a terrible tail”. The imaginative enthusiasm of the two boys evokes, strangely enough, that of the Dragon who “gives strength and great power to the Beast”! In translating verse 5, Bosco writes: “This beast was given a mouth. [...] Then he was given the power to act [...] then he was given the power to fight the saints. And to defeat them” The bonhomie of the word “mouth”, applied to the Beast, suggests already under the pen of Bosco the ambiguity of the invention of the Racal, which crystallizes a certain magic of the verb, condemned by Rimbaud in *A season in hell* [*Une saison en enfer*]... This is the highest sense of the analogy of the project of the two boys with that of the perverted men of the Apocalypse.

The fear of the two boys, however, brings them closer to the saints whom the Beast can conquer, but their stir of inventors “exalted” by their find; bring them closer to the apparent blasphemers, seduced by the wonders of the Beast. These wonders can be compared to the wonders of the puppet showman who, in the next chapter of Bosco, participates in this half-tone questioning of artistic illusion. Just before this theatrical episode, but after the invention of the Racal, this questioning takes the form of the little “Virgin of colored plaster”,⁴ discovered by the two boys in an abandoned chapel. The stalemate in

⁴Ibid., P. 94.

which art is led by its own illusionary abilities is nuanced by the faded memory of the sacred forms, which are its origin. But in our world, the loss of the aura of these forms, suggested by the plaster, limits this perspective.

The same goes for sacred art and its profane offspring, such as the Virgin and the Dragon fighting it in Ap. 12. This passage from *The Child and the river* where the two boys forget their Racal evokes just the crowned Virgin of twelve stars, in Rev. 12 (before the description of the beast in Rev. 13). This Virgin “pregnant, giving birth to a child”, is attacked by the Dragon carrying seven diadems. Under the pen of Bosco translator, the tone of the statement “pregnant [...] and childbirth suffered suffering” prepares (in a certain way) the matrix framework of the bordering passages of *The Child and the river* (Pascalet discussing with his old aunt). At the same time, this statement of Bosco, less realistic than some other translation of the vulgate, in the Jerusalem Bible, softens the ambiguity of this passage from the Apocalypse, where the Dragon desires to devour the child destined to “govern nations [...] under an iron scepter”. The dissociation of the Racal and the Virgin who succeeds him in Bosco’s narrative is another way of overcoming the scandal of this rather ambiguous confrontation between the Virgin and the Dragon.

This passage in the Apocalypse could nonetheless be read as a variation on the mythical pair of Rigor and Sweetness (two terms recurring in *Les Balesta*, Bosco’s later novel),⁵ which in Judeo-Christian esotericism cannot be confused with the relation of evil and good. If the Virgin “manifests the feminine aspect of Deity”,⁶ the child with the iron scepter illustrates the male “Rigor”, which is not a trait of the evil Dragon. The translation of Bosco resists the possibility of this confusion; likewise in this passage of *The Child and the River*, where the Rigor of the iron scepter is softened as much as it is impoverished in the two small leaded candlesticks on the painted wooden altar... Let’s go back to the Racal episode, which both boys are concerned about: “A long discussion was held to establish clearly the nature, race, and *name* of the beast.”⁷ In the last verses of Rev. 13, “the name of the Beast, or the number of its name”, imposed on the forehead of his disciples, is a mystery. Bosco mitigates the mathematical sense of this mystery, by writing: And its number is DCLXI “Under the pen of Bosco, these Roman numerals veil the duality, not only graphic, whose number 666 is the figure. The name of the Racal, with the doubling of the vowel, reads itself as a nominal anamorphosis of the number 666, among the “blasphemous names” what the Beast is wearing. Bosco translates well: “she *wore* blasphemous names”. But in *The Child and the river*, the “thirty-two points” from the copper wind rose which, on the bow of the boat where the two boys linger, “*wore* sixteen names of winds”, are encrypted symbol of duality reconciled.⁸

The double thread

The portrait of the beast, in the Apocalypse, is in fact the negative inversion of that of the Lord, in the first chapter. The traits of the Lord express so many aspects of the duality reconciled in the One. The “double-edged sword” that comes out of the mouth of the Lord in the Bible of Jerusalem, becomes under the pen of Bosco, the “double-wire sharp sword”. This contrast of the thread (or wire; “fil” in french) and the sword is a rather refined example of the *alchemy of the verb* from Bosco. This famous sword is precisely the Word; the Verb identified

with the One, considered in his split. Let’s emphasize first the image of “SON OF MAN” To which John turns: “He was wearing a long dress. A gold belt hugged him under the breasts. His head and hair were white as white wool, or as snow. His eyes sparkled like a flame of fire.”

The symbolism of these details in verses 13 and 14 of Ap. 1 is reflected in the portrait of Aunt Martine in the second paragraph of the novel: “It was an old-fashioned woman with the quilted headdress, the pleated dress, and the silver scissors hanging from her waist”⁹ The “folds” of her dress recalls the symbolism of the dress of the Lord, sartorial metaphor of the One harboring the multiple. The “flame” of Lord’s eyes, His sparkling eyes are humanized in the following of this portrait of Aunt Martine, with these details: “the feeling of adoration that sprang up, at the slightest opportunity, from his whole person.” The feminization of the Lord under the features of the great (paternal) aunt could be inspired by the bosom from the Lord. (Other translations are less ambiguous, but Lemaître de Sacy, in french, uses word “*mamelles*”...). Anyway, the great paternal aunt is as protective as the Lord: “he put on his hand [...]” (Verse 17). The family relationship that unites this great aunt and Pascalet allows also identifying Pascalet to the “Son of Man” (Jesus?) I will further underline the very marked christian traits of Pascalet, who is aptly named. (The pattern of the Lamb receives a singular brilliance in other chapters of the Apocalypse.)

We can match the “silver scissors” of the Aunt, the “double wire sword” rather than the fiery brazen which seem the feet of the Lord. Bosco translates: “From his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. And his face shone like the Sun in his strength.” Note also that these scissors are subject to a literal echo towards the end of the chapter in which this sentence reads: “The lightning opened and closed like scissors of fire.” The lightning that falls, in the following sentence, announces the passion of Pascalet for Gatzu-an equivalent of the “passion” from Aunt Martine, in the last sentence of this chapter. We cannot better suggest the sacredness of the relationship of the two boys: an incarnation of the mysterious principle that materializes in the double-edged sword, in other words the divine word. And this mystery is poeticized in the very relationship of these two symmetrical mentions of “scissors”.

The portrait of the Lord in Ap. 1 is completed by the evocation of “his voice [which] equaled the voice of the great waters”. The great waters, that express the strength of the Lord’s voice, find an echo in the writings of Bosco, always in the same chapter, in rising waters of the river: “We could hear them roaring in the distance”. Likewise in the next chapter, when Pascalet no longer masters the boat that leads him to the reef: “Water rumbled [...]”.¹⁰ Now, this roaring is itself an echo of the benevolent one of the grand- aunt, who “roared [from morning to night]”. The “great waters”, comparing the voice of the Lord, may well have generated this great aunt; which is one with her “roar”, as it is suggested by this alliteration. I have already underlined the symbolism of double wire sword, an expression of the combination of two contrastive qualities of the divinity: Rigor and Grace or Sweetness. This symbolism is still underlying in the contrast of the “piqué (quilted) headdress” of the aunt and the silver scissors hanging on her girdle, which prefigure the hooks of Bargatot, an adjoining character of the first chapter of *The Child and the River*. The report of Rigor and Sweetness contains in germ the problem of evil (human), if Rigor or Severity is manifested only because of the misguidance of men.

⁵See M. Arouimi, *Ecrire selon la rose*, Paris: Hermann, 2016.

⁶François Chenique, *Le Culte de la Vierge ou La métaphysique au féminin*, Paris: Dervy, 2000, p.115.

⁷Henri Bosco, *L’Enfant et la rivière*, p. 87-88.

⁸Ibid . P. 63

⁹Ibid ., P. 13.

¹⁰Ibid ., P. 14, 39.

Now, this time in Ap. 2, this sword is itself the object of a repetition in verse 12, followed in verse 13 by an allusion to Satan, when the Lord makes these words to John: "Also write to the Angel of the Church of Pergamum. Here is what it says the one that brings the double through sharp glaive I know where you live. There is the throne of Satan." This "throne of Satan" is not so forgotten in this story of Bosco, where the perfect harmony of Pascalet and Gatzto is threatened by the danger always topped with a competition, whose diabolism is rethrown on figures or details related the story. As evidenced in the first chapter the portrait of the poacher who visits the great aunt: "A tall, dry, wily knife-edge figure [...] gnarled arms, horny foot", etc. The fishes he brings have "silver bellies", which relate them to the silver scissors of the great aunt. Bosco gives there a deliciously sophisticated form to the Demon's rivalry with the Lord. Bosco also appears to be saving the numeral two (the Devil's figure), with "the keen eye" of this character, but still with his other presents: "beautiful blue steel hooks, or small corks": a poetic equivalent of the combination of scissors and the headdress. (The syntax itself seems to partake the symbolism of the numeral two, which do not occur in this sentence.). The same at the end of the chapter, with an echo of the word "knife", comparing the face of the poacher: "Bargabot drew out a *long knife* [phrase repeated in the same way]. He carved out a huge loaf of bread, put *two* fish in it, and drew a cross with his lamp over the food".¹¹ The knife and the loaf are two symbols of unity, so closed to each other!

The "double wire" of the sword, under the pen of Bosco, has a vaguely sacrilegious meaning, absent from the sword "double-edged" in other translations. The simple word "wire" in verse 16 (*fil* in french), is indeed not far from the mention of the SON OF MAN [*Fils de l'Homme*] (verse 13). The metaphor of "sound pillars", applied by Bosco himself to the lyrical aspects of his writing, is worth for the report of this "Son [Fils]" and of this « wire [fil]», moreover a *double fil*, which confers on the first a little of the duplicity of Satan? Even in these details, Bosco is experimenting in the language of the report, indicated by Mircea Eliade, of God and the Devil.

Jerusalem, earthly and heavenly

The demonic allure of Bargabot is nuanced by the analogy of his character with that of the great-aunt. Without doubt, Bosco answers, in 1945, with the problematic content of verses 9 to 16 of Ap. 2: "I know that you are slandered by those who call themselves Jews, and who are not, but who are a synagogue of Satan. [...] Here the devil soon lay in chains some people [...] I know where you live. There is the throne of Satan". This speech expresses the "double bind" felt by the first Christians, faithful to the word of a Jewish messiah (the church of Christ being perceived like the real Israel, according to the Jerusalem Bible). This anti-Semitism, which is not meant to be such, haunts Bosco's conscience, for reasons that I tried to pin down when I read *Les Balesta* (in my book *Ecrire selon la rose*, 2016). In *The Child and the River*, the Racal "decayed trick" crystallizes the faults reproached to the Jews around 1945.

In translating the Apocalypse, Bosco has his own conscience to go beyond anti-Semitism which he probably felt the exacerbation between 1942 and 1945? After verse 10 of Ap. 2, John is thrashing "the cult of Balaam", which encourages the Children of Israel to "eat the meat of idols and to fornicate". Bosco seems to oppose these deluded pleasures those, including culinary, which are moving the characters of *The Child and the river*. Anyway, in verse 10, the mention of the "crown of life" provided the key image in which Bosco expressed his conception of literature, of which this "crown of life" is the highest

¹¹Ibid., p. 28.

symbol.¹² The echoes of this word "crown" in *The Child and the River* underline at least the harmony of its structure.

Let's go back to the fish of Bargabot: "In the alga glittered silver bellies, bluish backs, and thorny fins". This last adjective (*épineux*, in french) is echoed in symmetry towards the end of this first chapter, in the evocation of Pascalet hair back from his first fugue: "They were *barbelés* of leaves and thorns". The Christ sense of the thorny fins is, however, made uncertain by their distant echo, this time towards the end of the story, in a kind of waking dream of Pascalet: "Monsters [...] with phosphorescent scales, from the recesses of hidden recesses, and some of them carried a signal of green and gold fire, at the summit of their spiny skulls".¹³ From Racal to these aquatic monsters, it's a bit like the report of the Beast of the Earth and the Beast of the Sea. In the same dream of Pascalet, the "strange landscape, diamond of stars and crystalline", and a little further "crystalline rocks", coincide this time with the "pure crystal", comparing the pure gold of the Celestial City, this *retreat hidden*, in Ap. 21: 18. The emerald, the fourth stone that adorns the ramparts of the heavenly Jerusalem (21: 19), is reflected in the "green and gold light" of luminous monsters observed by Pascalet in his dream. We would believe it all the better because the symmetry of these details, at both ends of the story (these spiny skulls of fishes and the hair of Pascalet, barbed wire of thorns) is equivalent to that of the two mentions of the emerald in the Apocalypse: that of the walls of the Celestial City and, this time in Ap. 4, this vision of the Lord: "And he who was seated in appearance was like the stone of jasper and sardoine. A rainbow shone around the throne, which looked like the emerald."¹⁴ Let's note the words "seemed similar", which give this vision a dreamlike meaning, lacking the vague anguish of Pascalet's dream.

Other details of this passage of Bosco confirm the transposition of this celestial throne and the mythical city in this dream that indeed extend these details: "On the tawny sand were small pebbles of blue porphyry and pink marble striated. Under the rock, between the pebbles, sometimes a bubble of air would hatch". These are the Biblical rainbow, petrified in this vision, and the ramparts of Jerusalem, disintegrated in the same vision! Still in Rev. 4, verses 6 and 7 are translated by Bosco with the recurring use of connotations of illusion, of which the Beast of wonders is yet the incarnation: "In front of the throne, there was a sort of sea of glass, like crystal. In front of the throne, around the throne stood four beasts, all with eyes, front and back. And the first was like a lion, the second to a calf; the third had a face, like a man; the fourth looked like an eagle flying. And these four animals each had six wings "... Bosco thus recreates the enigma of the relationship of these four celestial beasts and the double beast. Similarly, describing the skulls of monsters as thorny, which contrast with the equally thorny hair of Pascalet.

The awakened dream of Pascalet, which makes the return, real or dream of Gatzto, so uncertain, is still distinguished by the motive of the stars, in this same passage which evokes so much the visions of John: "I was in my first sleep [...] but I was not sleeping yet, at least really. I know it well, because my shutters had been left ajar and, by the crack, I saw twinkling two little stars. It seemed to me that these shutters were gradually opening up, and that a wider sky and a

¹²Henri Bosco, "Pages du diaire" (1930-1933), *Cahiers Henri Bosco*, 41/42, p. 57.

¹³Henri Bosco, *L'Enfant et la rivière*, op. cit., p. 149-151.

¹⁴Chrétien de Troyes has transposed these two exceptional mentions of the emerald into two symmetrical details of his Grail tale, which includes an explicit reference to the Apocalypse. See M. Arouimi, *Les Apocalypses secrètes*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2007.

greater number of stars were invading my room.” The words “as you go”, and especially “more people”, evoke the concern for the measure, omnipresent in the Apocalypse, especially in verses 16 to 20 of Ap. 1, where the numeral seven, applied to the stars, reveals one of the measures that effectively govern the biblical text: “He held in his right Seven Stars. [...] /When I saw him, I fell at his feet, like a dead man. But he put his right hand to me, saying: Do not be afraid! I am the First and the Last, THE LIVING. And I was dead. Now you see it, I live [and] hold the keys of death and hell. [...]] The mystery of the seven stars which you saw years of my right hand and the Seven Candelabres gold. The Seven Stars are the Angels of the Seven Churches and the Seven Golden Candelabra, the Seven Churches.” And just at the beginning of the next chapter: “This is what says He who holds the Seven Stars in his right, and who walks in the middle of the Seven Golden Candelabra”, etc.

Bosco’s translation, compared to that of the Jerusalem Bible, accentuates the sentence rhythm of this passage of the Apocalypse by multiplying the sentences. This rhythm undoubtedly shows the mystery which translates as well into the luminous notations of this passage of the novel: If the oxymoron is a way to translate the ideational unity, which is manifested, this time in the Apocalypse, by a certain rhythm of words; the (or a) key of this rhythm being provided by the numeral recurring Seven, capitalized by Bosco. It should be noted that the two mentions of Seven Stars in these verses of the Apocalypse, could have generated the effect of symmetry, in this passage of Bosco, between so many stars and the living stars that move “on their five blue branches”. Although Bosco does not mention the starfish in this passage, these five-pointed stars, associated with an aquatic decoration, can evoke this motive. This marine connotation - and animal - participates in the spectral diffusion of the myth of the Beast of the sea, not only in this passage.

Be that as it may, this late passage of the novel evokes another, this time in the first chapter, where an analogous landscape differs by the anxiety it mediates, and in which the word “dead” seems inspired

by the statement already quoted from John (“I fell [...] like a dead person”). Bosco writes: “a sandy beach. There the waters calmed down. It was a dead point. I went down there.” Indeed, the mystery of the “Seven stars” which in the biblical text succeeds this death can be close to an utterance of the paternal great-aunt, in the same passage where I have emphasized this “dead point”. The aunt is worried about Pascalet’s hunger: “Since *seven o’clock* in the morning! Unhappy! I bet your head is spinning”... As the head of John, dazzled by the manifestation of the “mystery of the Seven Stars”... Pascalet (“without answering”), agrees with these words that are in double agreement, if this hourly detail of “seven o’clock” reveals the mirror effect between his experience and that of Jean, stunned by his visions.

The translation of verse 17: “When I saw him, I fell at his feet like a dead man”, gives this comparison a singular reputation. In writing the history of Pascalet, Bosco tries indeed to *translate* a mystery, probably made more oppressive to him by the historical circumstances of the writing of these works. The poet working according to him to allow the dead to rise: “The dead are rising. These dead ones hidden in us, who are rather living beings fallen into lethargy. Restorations of memory, confused images [...] and a world in us are organized ghosts who want to take shape, to reincarnate”...¹⁵ The dead Bosco thinks of, those of his relatives, but also the unknown, victims of the Second World War; or those who, lost in time, expect to “reincarnate”... All the dead lose their traits in this story, when the features of characters reflect the major figures of the Apocalypse, which are the ignored models of our beings.

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None.

Conflicts of interest

Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

¹⁵Charles Du Ry, “Henri Bosco et le mythe”, in Henri Bosco. *Mystère et spiritualité*, Paris : José Corti, 1987, p. 201.