

Maupassant's Empty Mirror: From the Phenomenology of Anxiety to the Constitution of the Not-Man

Abstract: Maupassant's short horror story *Horla* (1887) contains a treatment of anxiety that can be analyzed in the context of Existentialist philosophy: Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Levinas or Cioran all observed the anticipatory trait of this affect. From a psychological point of view, anxiety leads to neurosis and/or psychosis, to the splitting of the principle of identity. This inner duality is famously expressed in the short story's scene of the "empty mirror", where the main character fails to see his own reflection. The descent into madness of *Horla's* diarist makes us think that he experiences the possession of the monster in terms of radical alterity, something that Cioran has called the *not-man*. I argue that through the lenses of this category of (psychological and theological) *inhumanity* we can understand *Horla* as a Nietzschean evolutionary tale that cautions against the end of mankind as we know it.

Keywords: existential anxiety, inner duality, radical alterity, inhumanity, (d)evolution, demonic possession, psychosis, Maupassant

Anxiety is present in one of the earliest entries of Guy de Maupassant's *Horla's* diarist. On May 16 he writes: "I am constantly aware of a feeling of imminent danger, and I sense some impending disaster or the approach of death, and it all amounts to a presentiment which is quite likely the first sign of some illness which has yet to declare itself, but is already germinating in my blood and in my flesh" (Maupassant 1998, 277). That sense of impending disaster [*un malheur qui vient*] reminds us of one of Kierkegaard's statements, which marks the birth of the phenomenology of anxiety ("a more precise and correct linguistic use links anxiety with the future" -- Kierkegaard 1981, 197) or of the paradoxical Cioranian intuition ("anxiety [...] a sort of *remembrance of the future?* – Cioran 1999, 76). Moreover, the anticipatory characteristic of the affect described by Maupassant can be analyzed in the context of Heidegger's treatment of the concept in *Being and Time*: "That which is detrimental, as something that threatens us [...] is coming close" [*Das Abträgliche [...] als Drohendes [...] naht*] (Heidegger 1978, 179-180).

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One can claim that the distance which must be covered by the *Drohendes* (the displacement of the future trauma) in its way to the *Dasein* (the fact that “I” am here and the “enemy” is not here (yet)) only feeds anxiety, which in turn becomes denser and darker. This coming close [*es naht*] (the feeling that you are followed, surrounded or under siege) is more terrifying than the unavoidable meeting with disaster [*es ist schon da*]. One could clarify this idea through the well-known association between anxiety and death, discussed by Cioran: “The only fear is, in fact, the fear of death” (Cioran 1996b, 26). The Romanian philosopher seems to suggest that the source of every anxiety is the fear of death: had death never existed, we would be immune to fear. Only when we meet death, when Epicurus’ death is “here”, we “walk over” anxiety, because the *Abträgliche* has already harassed us and the Birnam forest (Levinas’ example for this situation) has besieged Macbeth’s fortress (Levinas 1989, 41-2). But when death vibrates from the distance, when the forest only begins to murmur, when the threat begins its threatening ritual, the black sun of anxiety hypnotically rises at the horizon.

The anxiety of the narrator takes shape (on May 25) with the “dying of the light”, when the Apollonian lights of awareness are conquered by the Plutonic *Unheimlichkeit* of the *id*: “As evening approaches, an incomprehensible feeling of anxiety comes over me, as though the night ahead held some terrible threat” (Maupassant 1998, 277). The character seems to understand that night brings along with it a Harrowing of Hell or even a soteriological attack: will I emerge safe after the dominion of darkness, after the infernal trap that seeks to shatter my soul? We are reminded here of the terrible description of the “infinite night” from the novella *La petite Roque*: „Mais la nuit, la nuit opaque, plus épaisse que des murailles, et vide, la nuit infinie, si noire, si vaste, où l’on peut frôler d’épouvantables choses, la nuit où l’on sent errer, rôder l’effroi mystérieux, lui paraissant cacher un danger inconnu, proche et menaçant!” (Maupassant 1979: 641).

Beyond the *abstract* intimations of anxiety, which we all experience as *Daseins*, the immersion into sleep as in „a pit of stagnant water” [*un gonffre d’eau stagnante*] (another symbol of the *id*, after the terrifying night), brings us, not unlike in the painting *Nightmare* by Johann Heinrich Füssli, the *concrete* feeling of anxiety: “I get into bed and wait for sleep as some await their executioner [...] I fall into sleep as a man falls into a pit of stagnant water to drown [...] I’m also aware of the approach of someone who looks at me, touches me, gets onto the bed, kneels on my chest, takes my neck in both hands, and squeezes and squeezes with all his strength.” (May 25, Maupassant 1998, 277). Comparable to Füssli’s incubus, the “presence” described by the narrator in July 4, steps over his chest, “sucking the life out of me through my mouth, yes, drawing my life out of me like a leech” (Maupassant 1998, 281). This expression shows that between the main

character and the demonic apparition, between Ego and shadow (or servant and master, in Hegelian terms) a life-and-death battle is about to take place. There can be no armistice between two parties that share as unique battleground the body of a sole faction. In a fragment reminiscent of Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll* ("Man is not truly one, but truly two" – Stevenson 2002, 55), Maupassant's narrator infers the fundamental duality of the human being [*il y a deux êtres en nous*], who is at the same time A and non-A, violating the principle of noncontradiction: "If so, I have been walking in my sleep and, without knowing it, living a mysterious double life which makes a man suspect that two separate beings exist inside us, or that there are times, when our soul is lulled and torpid, when an unknown, invisible alien takes over our captive body which it obeys as it obeys us, only even more readily" (Maupassant 1998, 282).

The nightmare of possession, made famous by the horror movie tradition, fuels this fear of the shadow, understood as radical alterity. Maupassant personifies the shadowy figure, which literally "sucks the life" out of us. However, bracketing the phenomenology of anxiety from *Horla*, isn't it obvious that in the *night of Dasein*, in the depths of our *id*, resides someone else? Perhaps we all hide a shadowy subpersonality, an inner *alter ego*, a deeper *das Andere*, whom we anticipate in all our fierceness, in our repressed fanaticism... And maybe like Eminescu and Nietzsche, we have all been concealing an inner Dr. Jekyll, a subliminal Tyler Durden, an autonomous *Doppelgänger*, whom we are destined to meet only at the end of our psychoses. When the pale light of awareness fades away, we tend to turn to our inner alterity.

The narrator even provides us more concrete actuality in the entry of August 6, using the Jungian function of sensation, one that offers immediate access to reality: "This time, I know I'm not mad. I've seen him! I saw him with my own eyes! There's no doubt in my mind now: I saw him! My blood still runs cold. I can still feel the fear in my bones. I saw him!" (Maupassant 1998, 290). From the nightmarish intuition of Füssli's succubus, who stays on the narrator's chest and feeds with his *prāṇa*, we are led to the permanent *sensation* of possession, of sharing the same body: "I feel him near me, spying on me, watching, probing, dominating me" (August 8, Maupassant 1998, 292). Where Ego once ruled, there is only shadow, the proverbial light of the consciousness dims in the presence of darkness. It seems that we are listening to a sonata of *possession* and *dominance* in four movements:

1. *allegro furioso*: "I have lost the ability to will anything: but someone else is doing my willing for me; and I do what he says" (August 13, Maupassant 1998, 292).

2. *largo*: “I am nothing inside, merely a spectator enslaved and terrified by everything I do” (August 14, Maupassant 1998, 293).
3. *scherzo*: “What sort of creature is it who has taken control of me? He is invisible, unknowable: is he a roving member of some supernatural race?” (August 15, Maupassant 1998, 293).
4. *presto agitato*: “It is as if men, from the moment they began to think, have always sensed the presence of a new kind of being whom they have feared, stronger than they are, who will one day be their successor in this world” (August 17, Maupassant 1998, 294).

From (1) and (2) one might derive the “blackening” of the Ego, the death of the inner sun, which becomes the puppet of an evil director. Will the frightening master (“a roving member of some supernatural race”, „an occult being”, “a hazy phantom ... born of fear”?, August 15-17, Maupassant 1998, 93-4) be man’s successor? (A question left for the end of this paper.)

A key-scene from *Horla* takes place on August 19 (a date repeated in the diary: proof of the narrator’s confusion descending into madness?), when the main character stalks the monster, desiring to “to gaze into the face of absolute evil” (Jung 2014, §19, p. 10) or to „stare ... into an abyss” (Nietzsche 2001, 69).

So I was sitting there, pretending to write to allay his suspicions, for he too was watching me. Then all at once I sensed that he was there, reading over my shoulder, almost touching my ear. I leaped up with my arms out and turned round so quickly that I almost fell over. And then ...? It was as bright as day, but I could not see myself in my mirror! [...] It was empty, very bright, bursting with light! But my reflection was not there [...] and I was standing directly in front of it! I could see the tall, clear glass from top to bottom” (Maupassant 1998, 299).

In empirical terms, the *Horla* blocks the narrator’s reflection, the shadow stands between the mirror and the Ego. In symbolical terms, analogous to Tolkien’s Sauron or to the demon presented in the horror production *The Blair Witch Project*, the absolute evil is invisible (and vice versa). We can make two observations. First, when someone fails to see himself in a mirror, we might say that this a classic symptom of derealization, of the breaking down of consciousness. His identity (that famous $A=A$ of Schelling and Fichte) is shattered: He is no longer himself. Second, losing his “spatial root”, he flies beyond the territory of beings, beyond the *Dasein* GPS, being transported in a *Neverland of the id* where “la vida es un mal sueño”, he Transgressing the realm of reality, he enters a dream land. A quote from Maupassant’s letters, proved to be apocryphal, but very useful in this context, emphasizes the deep connection between the losing of one’s reflection and the dissolution of identity: “Do you know that when I stare for a while at my own image

reflected in a mirror, I have sometimes felt myself losing the notion of the ego?" (apud. Kessler 1995, xlv).

Discussing the narrator's alleged psychosis, many critics observed that insanity is not present in the text from a syntactical point of view. On one hand, "the narrator's logical coherence shows no sign of deteriorating and there is no trace of pathological semantic or syntactic distortion" (Traill 1996, 132). On the other "[à] la différence de ce qu'a tenté de faire Gogol dans *Le journal d'un fou*, Maupassant ne traduit pas la lente désagrégation de la pensée logique. La folie est contenue dans le texte, mais elle n'affleure pas dans la lettre du texte" (Camet 1995, 160). From this refusal of the portrayal of the psychotic disorganization, the French writer adds to the ambiguity of the story: if the character is not mad, the threat is even more real. However, the clinging to reason of the diarist could be the final defense of a superego harassed by id's *noche oscura del alma*.

In another paper (Bolea 2015, 33-4), I have used the Cioranian concept of the *not-man* to define an anthropological mutation which might supervene in the destiny of the *Dasein*. The monster called Horla could be well circumscribed – not only after a logical criterion but also from a psychological perspective – as *inhuman*. Let's take another look at the Cioranian texts before judging if Horla can be redefined as *not-man*.

There are among men some who are not far above plants or animals, and therefore aspire to humanity. But those who know what it means to be Man long to be anything but ... If the difference between Man and animal lies in the fact that the animal can only be an animal whereas man can also be *not-man* – that is, *something other than himself* – then I am *not-man*. (Cioran 1996b, 68-9)

Cynics are no longer supermen or submen, they are post-men. One begins to understand and even love them, when a confession addressed to one or maybe to no one escapes from the pains of our absence: *I was man and I no longer am now*... (Cioran 1996a, 126)

The not-man is man's radical alterity. Moreover, just like the Nietzschean overman, the not-man can be a symbol for a future development of the human being, for a genetic project project of self-transcendence. The man becomes not-man, Cioran shows, only when he is different from himself. Furthermore, there comes a moment when humanity becomes our past, when we can no longer be human. This touch of *inhumanity* is visible in Jean Lorrain's short story *The Possessed*. If Maupassant's not-man is a devilish invisible being, who terrorizes its host and drives him to suicide, Lorrain's not-man adds to this extraterrestrial component (shared with Horla and even Cthulhu) a disgusting animal feature. Because of his propensity to a shattering anxiety, J. Lorrain's narrator cannot distinguish between reality and hallucination, dehumanizing his peers and transforming the concept of not-man through a reverse Nietzscheanism into a *subman*:

I'd taken the tram from the Louvre to Sèvres, and the distressing effect of the suburban landscape ... brought me to such a pitch of anguish while I watched all those ugly faces, that I had to get off near the Pont-du-Jour. I couldn't bear it any longer; I was possessed, so sharply that I could have cried out for merciful relief, by the conviction that all the people facing and sitting to either side of me were beings of some alien race, half-beast and half-man: the disgusting products of I don't know what monstrous copulations, anthropoid creatures far closer to the animal than to the human, with every foul instinct and all the viciousness of wolves, snakes and rats incarnate in their filthy flesh ... [R]ight in front of me, there was a cigarette-smoking hag with a long, mottled neck like a stork's, and hard, widely-spaced little teeth set in a mouth that gaped like the mouth of a fish [...] That foolish woman seemed to me to be the archetype of an entire species, and as I looked at her, an unreasoning dread took hold of me that if she should open her mouth to speak, no human language would emerge, but only the clucking and cackling of a hen. (Lorrain in Stableford 2001, 128-9)

Echoing Lorrain and Maupassant, we could say that the *Dasein* veers to psychosis when he encounters the not-man, in his self or the outer world. The transgression of humanity brings us closer to the feeling of the numinous. After all, humanity can be compared to a prison where we were jailed for thousands of years. Therefore, the inhumanity is, in Maupassant's writing as well, an evolutionary experience. From a theological point of view, Horla can be seen as a not-man. The devilish aspect of the monster has already been exposed, being obvious that it departs from the pattern of "likeness" (Gen 1, 27). From a psychological perspective, Horla is the bringer of madness and of the dissolution of identity, destroying and splitting the Ego. Both Maupassant and Cioran show that the not-man is an extreme alterity, who can succeed once the human race is enslaved: "After man, the Horla" (the final entry from 10 September, Maupassant 1998, 302).

Now I know, I understand: man's reign on earth is over.

The thing is here, the One so feared by early peoples in their primitive terrors! The One whom anxious priests fought with exorcisms! The One whom sorcerers summoned at dead of night but never did see. The One whom men with second sight, sensing the existence of these elusive masters of the world, clothed in grotesque or pleasant shapes in the form of goblins, ghosts, djinns, fairies, and sprites [...] From the beginning, the vulture has eaten the dove; the wolf has eaten the lamb; the lion has devoured the sharp-horned buffalo; man has slain the lion with arrow, sword and gun. But the Horla will use man as we have used the horse and the ox: he will make us his chattel, his slave, and his food by using nothing more than the power of his will. Woe betide us!

Yet sometimes an animal will turn and kill its master!" (August 19, Maupassant 1998, 296-7).

Echoing Nietzsche's para-Darwinism, Maupassant sketches an evolutionary narrative, which does not end with the crowning of man, as Medieval

theologians would have conceived it. The breaking down of the anthropological structures of humanity (along with the death of God) brings us closer to an almost Lautréamontian dominion of the not-man. The mentioning of the human being as a mere predator is ironic and disdainful. We have mastered the animals with “arrow, sword and gun”: nothing is said of reason, intellect or soul. Horla will be the successor of the man also because humanity distinguished itself through the disregard of other species, which were either imprisoned or exterminated. The only comfort of the human race is to leave the masters’ side [*Herren*] and join the Nietzschean herd [*Herden*] and hopefully start a “revolt of the slaves”. Following the principle of anarchism (“I shall be the *enemy* of every higher power” – Stirner 2000, 165), man should aspire to the revenge of the “insulted and humiliated”, as Dostoevsky would have put it. “After all, dogs sometimes bite their masters; don’t they go for the throat?” (August 17, Maupassant 1998, 295).

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