

Alienism

“Les gémissements poétiques de ce siècle ne sont que des sophismes” - Lautreamont, Chants de Maldoror

In contrast to Disintegrationism, ALIENISM originated as a movement of writers, poets and philosophers, and has only recently been latched onto by the painters. Its situation with respect to music has always been rather bizarre. Although alienist writers and painters frequently assert that they are trying to transubstantiate formal and emotive structures already pre-existent in music into their own media, the musicians have always refused to have anything to do with them.

ALIENISM was invented by the French author HERVÉ DUCHASSE (1934-82). The word “Alienisme” was intended only to characterize his own writings. One could however argue, with more justice, that it actually characterizes his way of life. There is more than enough biographical material lying around to substantiate this claim, despite the fact that it is so often impossible to decide what should be accepted as truth and what should be treated as legend. Herve DuChasse, like many another author of our day, was obsessed with a compulsion to spread apocryphal stories about himself.

The clouds of mystery were, if anything, thickened by the discovery, just a few years ago, of a large, hand-written fragment of an autobiography in the DuChasse archives, now in the

Bibliothèque Nationale. There are at least as many fabrications¹ in this ludicrous, though often rapturous text, as there are in the many stories that circulated about him in the literary *haut monde* of Paris while he lived.

Indeed, DuChasse may have been a great writer, but the sad fact is that he would not have recognized the truth if it had walked in through the front door and bitten his hand. One might even say that truth was contrary to his philosophy: Alienism firmly rejects truth.

There is a general concensus on the fact that his wild, dissipated life, (DuChasse has reserved an entire chapter to himself in the mythology of the *poète maudit*), was the unfortunate result of the terrible sufferings he endured as a child growing up under the Nazi Occupation, in the desolate hamlet of *Ainay le Chateau*, just south of Bourges in the region known as the Bourbonnais.

Ainay le Chateau is, literally, a village of madmen. It is one of the towns designated by the French mental hospital system as a therapeutic center and out-patient colony. Incurable mental cases judged harmless enough to live outside the hospital walls, yet incapable of functioning independently in the greater society, are quartered in the village and assigned to menial jobs in its stores, restaurants and small factories.

DuChasse, in other words, grew up in a village about equally

¹ We shall refrain from following through on the natural conclusions to which our suspicions lead us, and call them outright lies.

divided between Germans, maniacs and respectable bourgeois citizens. His father, the village pharmacist, employed three of these psychotics as janitor, delivery clerk and stockboy.

According to DuChasse, whose veracity must always be doubted, these three men were used by the Gestapo as assistants in the torturing and execution of members of the French Resistance. Ainay lies at the edge of the *Foret de Tronçais* ; the forest was a natural refuge for Resistance soldiers. Every night, so he claims, these three ghouls would return to his father's pharmacy and terrify the young DuChasse with stories of what they had seen and done. He also asserts somewhere that they tried to drive him mad by threatening to do similar things to him, even tying him up for that purpose.

All of this is – well - at least believable; yet when DuChasse goes on to say that they sometimes took him along with them to their grisly seances, or that they used to conceal the carcasses of flayed and eviscerated animals under his bedcovers, or that he murdered one of them with a mixture of chloral hydrate taken from his father's cabinets, then one begins to ask how far poetic license should be allowed free rein.

And when, in other passages, DuChasse insists that the Gestapo tortured him as well, or loads his readers down with vivid depictions of bloody scenes obviously written for the purpose of turning their stomachs , then one can confidently dismiss these fantasies as the toxic wastes of a deranged mind.

After his date of birth, the first event in his life that can be accurately fixed is his first epileptic seizure. It happened on the afternoon of June 24th, 1957, in the World War I Armistice boxcar in the forest of Compiègne. This boxcar is an exact replica of the one in which, in 1918, the armistice that ended World War I was signed. It was meticulously reconstructed in 1946, as the original had been demolished by the Germans, down to the last thread of the last seat cushion, in 1940.

Hervé DuChasse claims to have provoked the fit deliberately: he often referred to it as *The first artwork of the Alienist movement*. Clearly this is hindsight. The word "Alienisme" does not appear in any of his writings until 5 years later, by which time he had already come out with the 3 volumes of poetry he'd begun as an inmate at the Bicêtre mental asylum.

The significance of this monstrous boxcar, atavistic symbol of xenophobia, chauvinism and blood, was not the sort of thing to be lost on the DuChassian imagination. He describes it in the following passage:

"Imagine-toi, si tu en est capable, cette immense tas d'ordures, ce necrolithe nephaste de l'epouvante et de l'insolite, puanteur de soutien-couilles de macreau maladive, temple immonde reconstruit jusqu'à la moëlle par les fistules de la politique pour l'ensevelissement de leur hontesse, symbole véritable de l'anti-symbole, cadavre vermoulu de la force splenitive de la frénésie chasse-pouvoir, biberon

gluant suintant des pêtes barbares du siècle vingtieme.....” ²

DuChasse generally sounds like this: there is not a harmonious note in his entire opus, save it be the music of the charnel-house, the dungheap, or the execution block.

Over the following year he was afflicted by a series of epileptic fits in close succession. The DuChasse family, acting on bad advice from his elder brother, a medical student at the Sorbonne, sent him to the notorious megalomaniac, Jacques Laçan, for therapy. Laçan had just published his essay "*Les Psychoses*", and was yet to be kicked out of the French Psychiatric Society because all of his patients were committing suicide. After 4 sessions with the famous doctor, DuChasse broke his nose. It is claimed that at the moment of doing so he cried out:

" I will not carry around on my back the corpse of my father!"

This ringing challenge to all that is decadent in Society and Art appears on the title page of DuChasse's long polemic essay, "*Alienisme et Sanctité*" (Alienism and Holiness) , published in 1965 by *Editions de Minuit* .

His rash action and the statement that went with it may well have made history, may indeed have broken down the dams of reaction to release the intoxicating floods of Alienism, but it landed

² " Just imagine, if you are able to do so, that enormous garbage heap, that mephitic necrolith of supernatural terror, that stink of the jockstrap of a sickly pimp, that detestable temple built, down to its very marrow, by the fistulas of the political world, for the burial of their shamelessness, veritable symbol of the anti-symbol, wormy corpse of the splenitive force of the lust for power, sticky baby formula seeping the barbarous farts of the 20th century."

DuChasse in the Hopital Bicêtre, strapped to a metal cot in a strait jacket with a rag pushed down his throat.

DuChasse's personality was nothing if not idiosyncratic: contrary to expectations, the 6 months he spent in isolation were very beneficial to him. For the first time in his life he was able to disentangle his thinking. This also aroused in him the burning desire to communicate that thinking to all mankind.

Following his release from the padded cell he remained on the premises of the Bicêtre for another 2 years. It was then that he cultivated his appetite for voracious, even frenzied, reading. Although he read everything he could get his hands onto, his principal influences were Villon, Rabelais, the Marquise de Sade, Lautréamont, Baudelaire, Nietzsche, Krafft-Ebbing, Rimbaud, Jarry, Artaud, Genet, Pound, Proust and Céline . He consumed the entire published opus of Céline, (*as well as a few privately circulated novels in manuscript smuggled in for him by the hospital attendants*), in one week!

Anything that aroused disgust amused him. When he was not self-consciously absorbing literature, he could be found pouring over treatises on medical anomalies, books on lurid sexual practices, barbarous executions or descriptions of grotesque medical procedures.

Yet the Existentialists (who at that time were basking in the international limelight) irritated him. Legend has it that on the very evening of the day of his release from the wards of the

Bicêtre in 1960, he took a bus all the way across Paris to the Café des Deux Magots, the well-known hangout for the worshippers of Sartre and Camus. There he shocked the existentialist crowd and its dilettante affiliates by bursting through the door, brandishing his fists, and crying:

" I hurl the Alienist defiance at the world!"

In its early stages the cult of *Alienisme* was based on 3 principles:

I. THE COMFORT IN ANY THOUGHT IS A MEASURE OF ITS ALIENATION FROM REALITY.

II. IT IS THE DUTY OF THE ARTIST TO DESTROY HIMSELF.

III. IT IS THE FUNCTION OF ART TO CHANGE LIFE.

Of these three, DuChasse believed the third to be his most original and lasting contribution to civilization. It must be conceded that, although the idea itself is far from original, having echoes as far back as the prehistoric cave paintings of Lascaux , yet it is doubtful that there has been another artist in our tradition who advocated the means DuChasse employed to this admirable goal.

In *Alienisme et Sanctité* , DuChasse identifies three human types as beings " possessed with demiurgic immanence " , that is to

say, having the power to bring about real changes in the world. He describes them by a wide range of labels, his most commonly used appellations being *le branleur*, *le tabasseur*, and *le fracasseur*. These may be roughly translated into English as “the flasher”, “the mugger”, and “the vandal”.

By a flasher of course, he meant the kind of person who exposes his or her genitals or other private parts in public places, accompanied with some sort of manipulation of them or other grossly indecent act. Apparently DuChasse practiced this himself. Soon after his release from the mental hospital, DuChasse moved to Charleville- Mezières, the birthplace of Arthur Rimbaud. As he puts it, he wanted *"to be close to the sources of inspiration."* During his stay in Charleville he adopted a dissolute yet stable routine combining alcoholism, epileptic seizures, long bouts of compulsive writing, and flashing.

Such behavior did not go over very well with the respectable citizenry of Charleville, and before too long DuChasse was arrested and put on trial for indecent exposure.

When asked if he had anything to say in his own defense, he replied *".....but the thing is, to mutilate the mind."* This presented the jury with an insurmountable stumbling block . The phrase is taken from a letter written by Rimbaud to a school companion. The "cult of Arthur Rimbaud" is Charleville's primary tourist attraction. Putting a man in jail for exemplifying the philosophy of Charleville's illustrious native son might have produced a strong

adverse reaction on the part of the caravels of college students slated to descend upon the town from all over the world within a few months. Hervé DuChasse was therefore released from prison, but banished from Charleville for 20 years.

Eventually he migrated to a very desolate region on the North Coast of Brittany, close by the coastal town of Ploubazlanec. There the local population quickly caught onto his ways and just let him do what he wanted.

We turn now to the mugger: DuChasse, as far as we know, did not himself engage in mugging, rather contenting himself with a literary veneration of the mugger verging on deification.

" *Le voyou*", he wrote, (one of his synonyms) " *est l'Apothéose de l'Absolu* ". 3

Commenting on a newspaper account of a teenage punk who beat a 90-year old man with his own cane to steal his Social Security check, DuChasse dubs the act " *l'orgasme de Dieu* " : God's orgasm. At one stage in his career, DuChasse became possessed of a species of demonic energy that enabled him to write, at a single sitting, 600 pages of infatuated praise to the cold-blooded killer, the ruthless adolescent hood, the executioner, the organizers of massacres, and various other " *artists of egoism and action*" who, through their arbitrary acts of cruelty, " *transformed life*".

Up to that point the actual violence perpetrated by DuChasse

3 The thug epitomizes ultimate reality

seems to have been pretty much limited to that blow on the nose delivered to Laçan. Under such domination anyone of healthy mind might have acted as he did. The vandal, in the DuChassian iconography, lies somewhere between the flasher and the mugger. DuChasse did engage in small bouts of vandalism and sometimes ended up in jail because of them. Such incidents only happened when he was drunk, and do not seem to have been related to any theoretical premise. The vandal is described by him as "*Un crapule au coeur de lache*": the criminal with the heart of a coward. His heart indeed is in the right place, but it pumps milk, not blood.

In the early 1970's Hervé DuChasse's epileptic seizures increased in both severity and frequency. There are several independent reports of persons encountering him staggering across the savage Breton countryside very late at night, a bottle of rotgut wine in hand, his head exposed under the beating rains, crying out for protection against conspiracies of Lesbians, Nazis, Satanists, Existentialists, the French Secret Police and the CIA. During one such night he took refuge in a wayside bar near Loguivy. Soaked to the bone, drunk to the point of insensibility and all but totally insane, his besotted gaze chanced to fall onto a wine-drenched and tobacco stained paperback copy of Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal*. Browsing through it at random, he came upon this magnificent passage from *La Charogne* :

*"Les jambes en l'air, comme une femme lubrique
 Brulante et suant les poisons
 Ouvrait d'une façon nonchalante et cynique
 Son ventre plein d'exhalaisons ."* 4

This passage had a calming effect on DuChasse's shattered mind. He moved closer to the fireplace and, in the manner of a catechism, began mumbling it to himself over and over again. He kept this up until the village gendarme arrived, hustled him into the *panier à salade* and drove him over to the detox tank in St. Briec.

It is this isolated passage from the works of Baudelaire that has been credited with transforming Hervé DuChasse from a basketcase into an important French writer. As we might say today he "got his act together." He himself speaks of this revelation as akin to a mystical experience. Six months later he was back in Paris. Here he was to remain for the rest of his days.

Much later in life, DuChasse would evoke these 7 years of exile in Champagne and Brittany in the long poem by which he is best known outside of France, "*L'Abscès* ", the one that begins:

"How dearly we paid for the cheap sins of youth....."

His life would henceforth be dedicated to the promotion, through novel, poem, tract and play, of the *dogma of the alien*

4 With Its legs, in the air like a raunchy whore's,
 Its stomach, burning and sweating poison ,
 Bloated with seeping gases,
 Opened in a fashion both cynical and indifferent.

experience. We defer discussion of the meaning of this phrase so that we may finish up this brief biographic sketch.

In 1973 , 8 years after the first edition of *Alienisme et Sanctité* , Alienism finally caught fire. From 1965 until his death 15 years later, Hervé DuCasse published 13 novels, 9 volumes of poetry, 3 plays and endless volumes of literary, philosophic and didactic journalism.

He also fathered about 20 children by as many women. Only two of them reached maturity; both are in institutions.

Only once again did he land in prison. It happened in July of 1969. During a cocktail party arranged by Editions de Seuil to launch a *succes de scandale* ⁵ , someone innocently remarked that NASA had just landed a man on the moon. DuChasse spontaneously went crazy and stabbed the person closer to him, not fatally but seriously, with a steak knife. It appears that DuChasse imagined that he was warding off one of those aliens about whom he'd been writing for his entire career. French justice would have kept him behind bars for life, but a petition to the government signed by every major French literary figure led to release after a year. DuChasse was docile from then on.

He died in 1980. He was run over by a truck after stepping out backwards out of an elevator into the street. At his request the following inscription, a quotation from the works of Richard

⁵ Both the author's name and the title of the book escape me right now, but if I remember correctly, it was about the history of the use of the fish as a metaphor in French literature.

Wagner, was placed on his tombstone:

" I believe in a Last Judgment at which all those who have in this world dared to traffic in sublime and chaste art, all those who have polluted and degraded it by the baseness of their sentiments, by their vile greed for material pleasures, will be condemned to terrible punishment. On the other hand, I believe that the faithful disciples of great art will be glorified and, surrounded by a heavenly amalgam of rays, perfumes and melodious sounds, will return to themselves for all eternity in the bosom of the divine source of harmony . "



II. Alienism, Mode and Modality

"..... This thread has not guided us in vain, since it had led us to formulate, by the end of last year, our experimental separation of the subject as a division between knowledge and truth, accompanied by a topological model, the Möbius strip, which makes us realize that it is not a distinction at the origin which produces the division at the place where the two terms come together..."

-Jacques Lacan, Science & Truth, 1966

"ALIENISM IS HOSTILE TO TRUTH !" : So begins a polemic by DuChasse's most prominent disciple in modern French letters, Armand Benoit Couture. "Truth" in this context is broad enough to encompass everything from scientific knowledge to the reporting in the daily newspapers, moral and social justice, artistic integrity, and even true love.

Couture goes on to state that Alienism strives for " *the immobilization of life and the animation of the inanimate.*" The intention behind of an alienist artwork is to create the alien experience. Despite his evident anti-rationalist bias, Couture can be quite lucid when he describes those situations that provoke the alien experience:

" You are standing in the busy marketplace of a unknown town; or, better still let us say that you are in the downtown area of a big industrial city in a foreign country. In one way or another, you have lost your bearings.

"The long cavernous street yawns like the open mouth of a killer shark, pregnant with elemental terrors; in every direction you encounter filth, noise and stench; you see many things around you that you find disquieting: gigantic and sinister office buildings surround you and block out the sunlight ; an abandoned automobile , pouring smoke from its entrails, is smashed up against a streetlamp that droops like a jaundiced poplar; panhandlers, their bodies teeming with vermin pass bankers trying to get past them on the way to their offices; a street musician, a blind one-legged old woman, bangs a drum, little more than a kitchen pot, and whines for pennies.

" Suddenly you say to yourself: This can't really be happening! You are certain that your imagination must be playing tricks with your mind. You keep coming back to re-examine the scene, carefully, not a few but many times. But it does not change; it does not go

away; it is not just in your imagination. Nor does the conviction that it can't really be there go away either. Nothing can make this feeling disappear. Days, months, even decades after you were witness to this environment, you remain convinced that you could not possibly have seen what you thought you saw.

"That is the alien experience."

In another essay Couture writes:

" The alien experience is the vase of roses in the torture chamber of the concentration camp. It is the senile professor of Latin who, while talking non-stop at the blackboard, chews off his fingers. It is the flasher who shits in the elementary school playground. It is the man who, craving the ultimate alien experience, eats a meal of crushed glass. It is the experimental theologian who crucifies animals to investigate Christ's sensations. It is Ronald and Nancy Reagan love-making in the White House. It is the Ayatollah Khomeinidi strangling Idi Amin with the guts of Yitzhak Shamir . It is the state that burns mountains of potatoes to help its starving citizens. It is the screams of the worms in those burning potatoes. It is the experience of writing an alienist poem. It is the experience of reading an alienist poem. It is everything that cannot-be-yet-is, and is-yet-cannot-be. "

As it stands Couture's relatively hum-drum, even tepid, description of Alienism , so commonplace when compared to the embittered raptures of his great master, DuChasse, seems to be simply a matter of identifying and communicating ordinary

feelings of alienation that we all experience from time to time. That Alienism is a new direction in thought, entirely unlike anything seen in the past, only becomes clear when one turns to other writers of less literary ability perhaps, yet greater philosophical acumen. The following passages are taken from the long essay *Alienisme et Aristote* , by Martin Byzance, published in the magazine *Tel Quel* in 1978:

" Alienism maintains", he argues, " that the comprehensible is always literally false. If you understand something it cannot be true. If it is true you cannot have understood it. Alienism poses, therefore, an advance beyond Aristotle, and is even now still searching for some logician who will provide it with its appropriate dialectical and diacritical formalisms."

Certainly the alienist praxis in *Alienisme et Aristote* is not designed to endear itself to logicians. Byzance goes on to produce a list of examples illustrative of this bold doctrine:

" Let us imagine that you are talking to an Alienist, and that you are not one yourself. You inform him that you believe there is some truth to be found in the equation ' $2+2=4$ ' . The Alienist would probably reply in this fashion:

" Vile disseminator of lies and seducer of youth! Gluttonous abortion (Avorton gourmand)!! You really expect me to take you seriously! To listen to your pathetic lies , you buggered rat-face, (Bougre au visage du rat)??? Get out of my house at once; your ignorance shits!!! I don't want to be forced to exterminate you!! I

refuse to drink my mother's blood from your father's skull!!!

" It may happen that you have misunderstood the source of the Alienist's rage; you may conclude that you'd offended him by wasting his time, stating something so completely innocuous. and Attempting to make your observations more interesting, you say:

" Don't forget to close your windows; there's a good chance of rain tonight." , he will immediately shout:

" Pauvre bouffie, tu ravasse!! (You're raving ,you pitiful fatso) . Go immolate your feet if you want excitement! Your quest for truth snivels like a squid! Va boire du sable avant que je ne me branle et emmerde ton cerveau! (Go and drink sand before I expose my prick and mess up your mind) Until you have mashed your balls to porridge I forbid you to speak with me! "

Couture and Byzance are both fashionable. Other writers profiting from the contemporary vogue for Alienism are Marie St. Clair Bourignon, Roger Aimable, Denis Rotonde, Aristide l'Eveque, Etienne Narzinski, and the writers of the review *Blouson Noir* .

One does not know how long this fad will last, and the *Maison du Livre* in Paris is already hedging its bets on the next literary movement.

Groups of writers calling themselves alienists can be found today in every country under the influence of the Western European cultural tradition. Certain places such as Russia, Germany, Korea, Syria, Brazil, Iran, Burundi, and South Africa

find nothing new in the dogma of the alien experience. The alienist writers in such places merely continue in the footsteps of a rich cultural heritage.



I conclude this essay with my free translation of the first four verses of *L'Abscès* by Hervé DuChasse :

The Abcess

How dearly we paid the cheap sins of youth,
Rusting the pin I twine out of the eye;
I, reeling through slaughter, grunt in my sty
To shatter my kneecaps on splinters of truth.

Oh, thrice-blessed Christ, epileptic of days!
I fondle your pardon: forgive these blood-soaked
stumps;
And chew, dear Lord, the dung I pat in lumps
Like the knowing butcher, kissing the skin he flays!

Once I bumbled in Charleville; I dropped my pants!
I, Rimbaud of the age; I vaunted my peter!
To slimy bourgeois scum, sickening cunt-eaters,
Their assholes labyrinthing billions of ants!

So tender these ruins , of grief and of remorse
These entrails of snot, these tarpits of pisses;
How swim the green faeces of the colic horse,
To touch the tumescent Rose with incorporeal kisses?

