

discussed them at length; but both were quite alike, although we will never know what opinion the author of *The Old Man and the Sea* pronounced on *The Sea-Wolf* in the cenacles of France. It may well be that the vacillations of taste have obscured the affinities between the two and emphasized their differences.

Jack London died at forty, having drained the life of the body and of the spirit. He was never satisfied with anything, and he sought in death the sullen splendor of nothingness.

[1979]

[EW]

Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, *The Guest at the Last Banquets*

Jean Marie Matthias Philippe Augustus, Count of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, was born in Brittany on the 7th of November in 1838, and died in Paris, in the hospital of the Frères de Saint Jean de Dieu, on the 19th of August in 1889. The unrestrained and generous imagination of the Celts was one of the gifts that chance or fate bestowed upon him, as well as an illustrious lineage—he was descended from the first Grand Master of the Knights of Malta—and a sonorous disdain for mediocrity, science, progress, his times, money, and serious people. His *Future Eve* (1886) is one of the first examples of science fiction. His play *Axel* recreates the theme of the philosopher's stone. *Rebellion*, staged in Paris in 1870, anticipates Ibsen's *The Doll House*.

Romantic in the rhetorical manner of the French, he declared that the human race is divided into romantics and imbeciles. The customs of his time demanded that a writer abound not only in memorable phrases but also in impertinent epigrams. Anatole France relates that one morning he went to Villiers' house to get information about his ancestors. Villiers replied: "At ten in the morning, in broad daylight, you expect me to speak of the Grand Master and the celebrated Mariscal?" Seated at the table of Henri V, aspirant to the throne of France, and hearing him criticize someone who had sacrificed everything for him, he said: "Lord, I drink to the health of Your Majesty. Your qualifications are decidedly unquestionable. You have the ingratitude of a king." He was a great friend of Wagner's and was once asked if the composer's conversation was agreeable. "Do you think conversation with Mt. Etna would be agreeable?" he replied.

There is something histrionic in his life and in his work; although it is true that the circumstances of being both an aristocrat and extremely poor

favor such postures. It is also worth recalling that Villiers, because of the image that he was always trying to project in Paris, was essentially defending himself. A meager standing would have mortified him as much as his meager straits, which at times verged on miserable poverty.

Where can a poet go, through the excess that is his imagination, to escape his own time and place? It is obvious that the Verona of Romeo and Juliet is not exactly situated in Italy, that the magical sea of the "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is the magnificent dream of an English poet at the end of the eighteenth century, and not the sea of Conrad or the sea of Homer. Will I someday perhaps write a poem that does not take place in Buenos Aires? The same occurred in Villiers with Spain and the Orient: they are as French as Flaubert's laborious *Salammbô*.

The best tale in our series and one of the masterpieces of the short story is "Hope." The action takes place in a very personal Spain, and the time is vague. Villiers knew little about Spain, nor did he know much about Edgar Allan Poe. Nevertheless, both "Hope" and "The Pit and the Pendulum" are similarly unforgettable, because both understand the cruelty that can come to the human soul. In Poe, the horror is of a physical order; Villiers, more subtly, reveals a hell of a moral order. After the incredible Spain of "Hope," we have the incredible China of "The Adventure of Tse-i-la." The story bears the epigraph "Guess or I shall devour you," which Villiers ingenuously attributes to the Sphinx. It deals with an artifice whose object is to trick the reader. The whole story is based on the pride of the two characters and the atrocious cruelty of one of them; the end reveals an unsuspected generosity that includes a humiliation. "The Secret of the Church" conceals an affirmation of all Protestant sects; its strength is in the fact that the believer implicitly confesses that his soul is lost. The theme of "Queen Ysabeau" is, again, the cruelty of the powerful, enriched in this case by the passion of jealousy. The unexpected ending is no less atrocious. "The Guest at the Last Banquets" deliberately begins in a frivolous mode; there is nothing more banal than some carefree and happy revelers deciding how to amuse themselves until dawn. The appearance of a new participant darkens the story and brings it to a horror in which, incredibly, justice and madness converge. In the same way that the parodic *Don Quixote* is a book about knights, "Somber Tale, More Somber Narrator" is both a cruel story and a parody of a cruel story. Of all of his works, "Vera" is, without a doubt, the most fantastic and the closest to the oneiric world of Poe. To console his sadness, the protagonist creates a hallucinatory world; this magic is rewarded with a tiny and forgettable object which contains one last promise.

Villiers in Paris wanted to play with the concept of cruelty in the same way that Baudelaire played with evil and sin. Now, unfortunately, we know too much to play with any of them. *Cruel Stories* is now a naive title; it was not when Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, between grandiloquence and emotion, proposed it to the cenacles of Paris. This almost indigent great lord, who saw himself as the luxuriously outfitted protagonist of imaginary duels and imaginary fictions, has impressed his image on the history of French literature. Less than Vera or the Aragonese Jew or Tse-i-la, we think and will think of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam.

[1984]

[EW]

P'u Sung-ling, *The Tiger Guest*

The *Analects* of the very rational Confucius advise us that we must respect supernatural beings, but immediately adds that we must keep them at a distance. The myths of Taoism and Buddhism have not mitigated that ancient advice; there is no country more superstitious than China. The vast realist novels it has produced—*The Dream of the Red Chamber* is the one to which I most often return—abounds in wonders precisely because it is realist, and marvels are not considered impossible or even unlikely.

Most of the stories chosen for this book come from the *Liao-chai* of P'u Sung-ling, whose pen name was the Last Immortal or Willow Springs. They date from the seventeenth century. We have chosen the English version, *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, by Herbert Allen Giles, published in 1880. Of P'u Sung-ling, very little is known, except that he failed his examination for a doctorate in letters in 1651. Thanks to that lucky disaster, he dedicated himself entirely to literature, and we have the book that would make him famous. In China, the *Liao-chai* occupies the place held by *The Thousand and One Nights* in the West.

Unlike Poe or Hoffmann, P'u Sung-ling does not marvel at the marvels he presents. He is closer to Swift, not only in the fantasy of his fables but in the laconic and impersonal, intentionally satirical tone with which he tells them. P'u Sung-ling's hells remind us of those of Quevedo; they are administrative and opaque. His tribunals, lictors, judges, and scribes are no less venal and bureaucratic than the terrestrial prototypes in any place in any century. The reader should not forget that the Chinese, given their superstitious nature, tend to read these stories as if they were real events, for in their