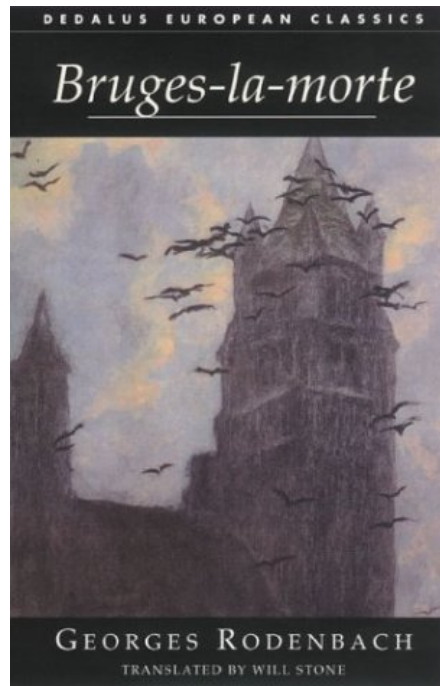




Bruges-La-Morte

Georges Rodenbach , Will Stone (Translator)

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Hugues Viane is a widower who has turned to the melancholy, decaying city of Bruges as the ideal location in which to mourn his wife and as a backdrop for the narcissistic wanderings of his disturbed spirit. He becomes obsessed with a young dancer whom he believes is the double of his beloved wife, leading him to psychological torment and humiliation, culminating in a deranged murder. This 1892 work is a poet's novel, dense, visionary and haunting. Bruges, the 'dead city', becomes a metaphor for Hugues' dead wife as he follows its mournful labyrinth of streets and canals in a cyclical promenade of reflection and allusion--the ultimate evocation of Rodenbach's lifelong love affair with the enduring mystery and mortuary atmosphere of Bruges.

Bruges-La-Morte Details

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From Reader Review Bruges-La-Morte for online ebook

Vit Babenco says

“Upon the day following the funeral of the wife in whom was bound up all his possibilities of happiness, he had retired to Bruges as a fastness of melancholy and there succumbed to its fascination.”

The old Gothic town and the bereft widower are in the perfect harmony...

Georges Rodenbach does everything possible to create the atmosphere of the morbid deadly melancholia and this authentic aura of hopelessness and doom turns the novel into the well of despondency.

“In the vistas of the canals he discerned the face of Ophelia rising resurgent from the waters, in all the forlornness of her beauty, and in the frail and distant music of the carillon there was wafted to him the sweetness of her voice. The town, so glorious of old and still so lovely in its decay, became to him the incarnation of his regrets.”

The main hero walks the streets of Bruges as if lost:

“After ten years of constant companionship with a woman to whom he had been absolutely devoted, he had been rendered utterly unable to accommodate himself to her absence. His only resource was the attempt to discover suggestions of her in other countenances.”

And unexpectedly he meets the woman who resembles his late beloved wife like the reflection of the moon in a canal resembles moon. But the reflection isn't substantial, it is enough the slight breeze to ripple the water and the reflection is distorted and destroyed... So gradually, the protagonist gets disillusioned and becomes more and more obsessed and depressed.

“Hughes urged upon himself the necessity of bringing his life into conformity with the behests that were everywhere issued around him. Bruges became again to him an intangible personality, guiding, counselling, and determining all his actions.”

And depression, cooped in the sick consciousness, always finds the most unpredictable outlets.

Eadweard says

This is going straight to my Favorites shelf.

" Ten years of this happiness, ten years hardly noticed, so quickly had they passed. Then his young wife had died, just as she reached her thirtieth year, confined for a few short weeks to her bed, which quickly became her deathbed, an image that would remain with him for ever: faded and white, like the candle burning at her head, the woman he had adored for the beauty of her radiant complexion, of her eyes, black, dilated pupils set in mother of pearl, their darkness contrasting with the amber yellow of her hair, hair which, loosened, covered the whole of her back in long, wavy tresses. The Madonnas of the Primitives have similar flowing locks, descending in calm ripples. During the last days of her illness, this sheaf had been braided into a long plait and Hugues had cut it off from the recumbent corpse. Is not death merciful in this? It destroys everything, but leaves the hair intact. The eyes, the lips, everything crumbles and disintegrates. The hair does not even lose its colour. It is in that alone that we live on.

Even now, after five years, the tresses of his dead wife that he had kept had scarcely faded at all, despite all the salt tears shed."

"In this solitude, that was both evening and autumnal, with the wind sweeping up the remaining leaves, he felt more than ever the desire to have finished with life and impatience for the tomb. It seemed that a shadow was cast from the towers over his soul, a word of counsel reached him from the old walls, a whispering voice rose from the water – the water coming to him as it came to Ophelia, according to what Shakespeare's gravediggers tell. More than once he had felt this seduction. He had heard the slow persuasion of the stones, he had truly discerned the nature of things there, not to survive the death all around. He had thought long and hard about killing himself.

That woman, oh, how he had adored her! He still felt her eyes on him, still sought after her voice, now fled to the far horizon."

"All this coalesces in one profound mortuary impression which little by little the town reveals to us and which is sustained even here in the sombre cathedral where reside those moving tombs of Charles the Bold, lying on his back, hands folded in prayer, feet upon a lion, symbolising strength, and of Mary of Burgundy, in a gown of marble, her feet resting on a heraldic greyhound, symbol of fidelity. And so many other tombs: all the slabs are memorial stones, with skulls, names chipped away, inscriptions already eaten into as if by lips of stone. Here death itself is expunged by death!"

Proustite says

Hugues Viane has retired to Bruges after the death of his wife of ten years; five years later, he is still unable to put her memory to rest. Indeed, he has sequestered himself in his home, erecting a shrine to his wife; in this room are gathered her portraits and various objects and trinkets, along with a tress of her hair which Viane has placed inside a glass box. Each day he caresses and kisses each item, and by night he takes to the meandering the streets of Bruges whose grey melancholy he feels in tune with, a kind of "spiritual telegraphy between his soul and the grief-stricken towers of Bruges."

As in many symbolist texts, doubling is apparent here: not only is Viane's mood that of the city, and therefore emphasized, but his grief is so obsessive that he chances upon a woman whom he believes to be the striking image of his dead wife. This act of doubling is one in which Georges Rodenbach is extremely interested in that it proves how the dead die twice, the first death being their physical death and the second being when our memories of them begin to fade, causing those mental images to which we cling to no longer be sources of recollection and comfort:

But the faces of the dead, which are preserved in our memory for a while, gradually deteriorate there, fading like a pastel drawing that has not been kept under glass, allowing the chalk to disperse. Thus, within us, our dead die a second time.

Bruges-la-Morte is very much concerned with the vacillation between states of intense joy and utter anguish. In his obsession over Jane, the woman who resembles his dead wife, Viane is embodying this idea of the dead dying twice. While there are moments of some melodramatic intensity characteristic of symbolist work, Rodenbach is also keen on exploring how the life of a small city reacts to a scandal, and it is both the solitary city scenes that drive home the despair of the protagonist and the scenes of townspeople gossiping in the city that demonstrate how the city works in different ways for its inhabitants.

Although he is under "the spell" of this double, and even though he hopes that the likeness "would allow him the infinite luxury of forgetting," Viane can do no such thing, and soon finds himself at an erotic and psychological crossroads at which the "distressing masquerade" he enacts to quell his grief is not enough to sustain the memory of the dead.

Bruges is very much the main character in the novel: "He was already starting to resemble the town. Once more he was the brother in silence and in melancholy of this sorrowful Bruges, his *soror dolorosa*." The novel is accompanied by photographs of the city to underscore the central role it plays in Viane's state of mourning. Rodenbach is adamant about how living spaces breathe and affect those living there:

Towns above all have a personality, a spirit of their own, an almost externalised character which corresponds to joy, new love, renunciation, widowhood. Each town is a state of mind, a mood which, after only a short stay, communicates itself, spreads to us in an effluvium which impregnates us, which we absorb with the very air.

This idea of the city having an emotional and psychological state of its own is also something Rodenbach explores in the short essay included in the Dedalus edition, "The Death Throes of Towns." *Bruges-la-Morte* is a symbolist masterpiece; more than that, it is powerful novel about grief and mourning, as well as a treatise on how one's city can reflect one's emotional state, and vice versa.

Stephen P says

A time of melancholic desperation. Everything appears reminiscent of the loss of our loved one. It is not a projection of our loss but that we chose to live here, a place which occupies our feelings, moods. The inner and outer has become dissoluble. Each is the other and enables us now to dedicate ourselves not to the stopping of life but to the dedication of our life to the devoted mourning of our dead love. This is a religion which is supported by the mementos of the beloved dead wife including a tress of her golden hair, where homage is paid daily. A solitary life in a large house, each day repetitively scheduled including walks through the brooding empty streets of Bruges where the only occasional passers by are elderly women, bent and hooded apparitions of the march of death. The town appears in its meager population to be a summonings of those waiting for time to pass without disruption to end in a, good death.

Poetic and ethereal we march on to the peal of church bells, the towers and belfry, the grayness of the town's substance. Only forty already we are stooped over in our shuffled downtrodden walk. The woman we see impossibly resembles our loved one; in appearance, gait, gesture. We follow.

Rodenbach has created a land where inner and outer is emphasized through the distance of the third person narrator yet inclusive is the inner workings of the characters. All this set in a world where what is left out is as important as what is mentioned in constructing the febrile, tenuous, atmosphere so important in the telling of this tale. Little is mentioned to us of the lost beloved wife other than the mementos and his recall of their happiness for ten years. The mementos are arranged in the house's sitting room. All we know about the house is its largeness and its gloom, housing him and his elderly female servant. His, ours, Bruges, is not a concrete world but a world of resemblances. An entombment into a dust of memories.

Yet he, we, follow the woman, the flesh and blood woman into a theater. She is not seated in the audience. As the opera begins we see her on the stage. This is a world created for the stage as this book is an entire world created for us, by us. Unusual. Recommended.

Ingrid says

Capolavoro di neanche cento pagine, che andrebbe obbligatoriamente letto nelle scuole, come uno dei grandi romanzi della letteratura simbolista e decadente quale è.

Ingiustamente poco conosciuto (sebbene abbia profondamente influenzato i "nostri" scrittori crepuscolari), lo scrittore belga francofono Rodenbach (1855-1898) ha colto perfettamente le sensazioni, le emozioni, l'essenza delle cose di una città incantevole come Bruges, che io ho visto più volte e più volte ho amato.

Incentrato sul tema del doppio, della memoria e della somiglianza, Bruges la morta è un lungo racconto più che un romanzo. Un vedovo inconsolabile si è rifugiato a Bruges, eleggendo quella città malinconica e come essa stessa morta, a simbolo della moglie scomparsa, di cui conserva gelosamente le reliquie. Finché un giorno non incontra per caso una donna nell'aspetto incredibilmente simile alla morta.

Fin dalle prime pagine mi ha colpito l'intimo rapporto tra Hugues e la città di Bruges che incarna i suoi rimpianti, il dolore, la consapevolezza di una vita senza più senso. Le torri, le vecchie mura, le chiese univano la loro voce per nutrire il desiderio di morte dell'uomo, la sua impazienza della tomba. Solo la religione gli vietava di darsi la morte perché Dio l'avrebbe allontanato per sempre da Sé e lui avrebbe perso l'ultima possibilità che aveva di rivedere l'amata moglie.

Come molti hanno notato, tante sono le somiglianze con la storia di "Vertigo" di Alfred Hitchcock, a testimonianza dell'influsso che Bruges la morta ha avuto nel '900 sia in letteratura, sia nella musica, sia nel cinema.

Da leggere assolutamente.

Mickdemaria says

Bella scoperta questo Rodenbach con il suo più famoso romanzo.

In uno stile che ricorda un po' certi autori mittleuropei e con un occhio al simbolismo francese Rodenbach ci accompagna per i vicoli di Bruges, ci fa respirare le sue nebbie, spiare tra i suoi canali mentre insegue l'eterno sogno del doppio. Inevitabile pensare all'hitchcockiano Vertigo leggendo dei primi incontri con l'inaspettata sosia, dei pedinamenti nel teatro, del tentativo di trasformarla nell'altra vestendola degli abiti dell'"originale" (tra parentesi una doppia chiave di lettura di Vertigo vuole che in effetti Hitchcock tentasse di trasformare Kim Novak in Tippi Hedren...)

Un bel romanzo dal gusto fumoso, una Bruges inquietante ed inquinata dal beghinaggio, infestata da manifestazioni religiose e da delatori bigotti che si nascondono in ogni quai, l'ennesimo fallimento di un Orfeo qualunque di ritrovare la propria Euridice.

Bello. Voto: 7,5

João Reis says

Não sei se Bruges morreu, mas que Rodenbach mata um leitor de tédio, lá isso mata.

Não tenho pachorra para necrofilia gótica e simbolista.

aithusa says

Bellissimo romanzo nelle sue tinte cupe e inquietanti, con una Bruges che con i suoi vicoli silenziosi e malinconici, i canali plumbei, il suo grigiore, è in realtà vivissima nel suo essere morta grazie alla prosa di Rodenbach.

Da qualche parte ho letto che questo romanzo è "una celebrazione lirica di una città e un'inquietante allegoria di una condizione umana e culturale" penso sia una definizione perfetta di questo romanzo.

[P] says

Funny how, years later, I can still picture that one pose, how everything else has fallen away – all the bitterness, the arguments, the boredom – and left only that. I didn't even see it first hand, I saw only her reflection in the surface of the mirror. I was sitting on her bed, and she, with her back to me, was grabbing at her short hair and pouting at herself; and I don't know, I can't recall, if I even found it beautiful at the time, but, after the break-up, this probably unreliable memory became, for a short while, an obsession, and the standard against which I judged all other women's looks. How silly of me. In my mind I thought I was paying tribute to her, and yet in reality I was doing her an injustice, reducing her to a single image, one that no one, not even she, could have lived up to. If I see pictures of her now, which I do very infrequently, I just cannot square them with that young woman reflected in the mirror, who, I'm now sure, never existed anywhere but in my head.

Generally speaking, I'm not one for living in the past, for desperately scrambling after something that has gone. It's too much like chasing a runaway donkey. It has a taste of the absurd about it. But I was nineteen at the time of the above anecdote, and nineteen is an absurd age. Besides, grief does strange things to you. No, she didn't die, but the end of a relationship is a kind of death, a little death. It felt that way, anyway. I was in mourning; well, until I got over it, of course. Some people, however, never manage to do that, they cannot move beyond tragic or upsetting events. People like Hugues Viane, the central character in Georges Rodenbach's atmospheric masterpiece *Bruges-la-Morte*.

"It was Bruges-la-Morte, the dead town entombed in its stone quais, with the arteries of its canals cold once the great pulse of the sea had ceased beating in them."

In the opening pages Hugues is described as a solitary man with nothing to occupy his time. This, it soon becomes clear, is because his wife of ten years is dead. Or, more accurately, it is because, as hinted, he cannot get over his wife's death, for he has, obviously, not been forced to spend the last five years alone, it is a kind of choice. Hugues wallows in his grief; he moves to Bruges, because it strikes him as a melancholy place, he contemplates suicide [but won't go through with due to the small chance that this will prevent him renewing his relationship with his wife in heaven], and he is still wearing mourning for his spouse half a decade after she passed away. Moreover, he will not throw or give away her clothes or things, or change the arrangement of the home they shared, for this, he thinks, will, in a way, mean losing her again, or another part of her. It is, then, no surprise, although it is rather macabre, that his most treasured possession is a large chunk of her hair, which he removed from the corpse and keeps in a glass case.

On the basis of all this one might legitimately call Hugues obsessive, or even insane. Certainly there is,

whatever you want to call it, something unhealthy and peculiar about his behaviour even at this early stage of the narrative. However, as things progress, one is left in no doubt at all as to how dangerous his frame of mind has become, as he first follows and then begins a kind of relationship with a woman who he believes is the very image of his dead wife. Yet it is to Rodenbach's credit that one, or I at least, still feels some level of sympathy for his protagonist, even in the weirdest and most excruciating moments, such as when he attempts to make this doppelgänger try on one of his wife's dresses. *Bruges-la-Morte* is less than one hundred pages long, and so the author did not have much to work with, but I never stopped believing in Hugues; he, and his grief, always felt kosher to me.

[Portrait of Georges Rodenbach by Lucien Lévy-Dhurmer, 1895]

While the trajectory of Hugues' relationship with this look-alike is what gives the novel momentum and tension, and I'd argue that all great novels need those things, it is not what provided me with the most enjoyment. First of all, Rodenbach's prose is fantastic. I have seen it described as ornate, but it never struck me that way, especially in the context of when the book was published, 1892, a time when authors really did know a thing or two about overcooking their sentences. For me, Rodenbach wrote with clarity, and insight and tenderness. His prose is that special kind that, if I can write this without too much cringing, glides along the page, with grace and absolutely without pretension.

I was also impressed by how he worked his themes into the narrative, in a way that is touching and engaging without being too heavy-handed. *Bruges-la-Morte* is, of course, primarily concerned with death, but rather than focussing on corpses and funerals and all that, he chooses to write about change and decay and memory [which are all, or can be, related to death, of course]. I have mentioned some of this stuff already, but it is worth exploring in more detail. Take the locks of hair, Rodenbach notes how, while the body slowly disintegrates, the hair remains constant, it doesn't change or fade, it, in effect, challenges death. I was very much taken with that.

Or consider how it is said that the face of Jane, the look-alike, becomes that of his wife, how, to be specific, after seeing Jane her face actually replaces that of his wife in his memory. We have all, I'm sure, experienced that strange and cruel phenomena, whereby we cannot properly remember what someone looks like, where, after a period of time, their appearance starts to become fuzzy in our minds. This is what happened to Hugues, so while he thinks that Jane is a deadringer for his dead love, in actual fact it is only ever Jane he sees; his wife, in essence, becomes Jane, not the other way around. I thought that was brilliant. Moreover, the marriage, we're told, was extremely happy, was one where the passion and love never diminished over time. Therefore, one wonders whether this is simply how Hugues remembers it, rather than it being strictly the case, for his wife has become, in his mind, a kind of saint. Indeed, he literally worships her memory and treats her things like relics.

[*Bruges-la-Morte*, when originally published, featured a number of photographs of Bruges, including this one]

I hope I am managing to give some sense of how complex, moving and satisfying a book this is. There is, moreover, still much that I have not covered. I haven't, for example, mentioned how mirroring plays such a prominent role in the text. Yes, of course, there is Jane and how she is the wife's double, but there is more to it than that. At the very beginning of the book Hugues house is said to be reflected in the water of the canal outside. There is also much made of how Bruges itself mirrors the wife, how it is a dead city, and how Hugues needed a dead city to represent the dead woman. I must, before I finish, cover this in a little more

detail, for *Bruges-la-Morte* is often described as one of the great ‘novels about cities,’ similar, in this way, to *Ulysses* or Bely’s *Petersburg*. Yet, without wishing to compare the quality of the three books, all of which I love, I would say that this one gave me more of a sense of place than the others. Bruges, we’re told, is where radiant colours are neutralised and reduced to greyish drowsiness, like a pastel drawing left uncovered. Which is, let’s be honest, fucking brilliant.

“Every town is a state of mind.”

Rodenbach takes us down the narrow streets, upon which falls constant rain, to the Église Notre-Dame [not the one in Paris], along the canals, and at every step there is an interplay between place and man, each intensifies the inherent sadness or bleakness of the other.

Even Rodenbach's tomb is amazing.

Warwick says

I sometimes get the worrying feeling that nineteenth-century men preferred their women to be dead than alive. There is something archetypal about the repeated vision of the pale, beautiful, fragile, utterly *feminine* corpse. Beyond corruption, a woman who's died is a woman you can safely worship without any danger that she'll ruin the image by doing something vulgar like using the wrong form of address to a bishop, or blowing your best friend. It's a vision that crops up everywhere in the works of these *fin-de-siècle* writers, who were unhealthily obsessed with Edgar Allan Poe and with the figure of drowned Ophelia (for them, more Millais than Shakespeare):

Bruges-la-Morte (1892) is the apotheosis of this kind of preoccupation. As my introductory para suggests, I find the general mindset a little problematic, but this is certainly a beautifully-written distillation of the theme. Hugues Viane, our melancholy hero, settles in Bruges after the death of his wife, and prepares to live out the rest of his days nursing his memories of her: he dedicates a room of his house to her portraits, and preserves a lock of her hair in a glass cabinet.

When he's not staring at her pictures, he's out taking moody walks along the canals.

Where, one day, he sees a woman in the street who looks identical, in every detail, to his dead wife. Is it a ghost? An appalling coincidence? His mind playing tricks on him?

And might it be somehow possible to recreate his lost love...?

Viane is the main character; but drizzly, grey Bruges is the real hero of the book. The city is portrayed as the necessary complement to Viane's feelings of loneliness:

Une équation mystérieuse s'établissait. À l'épouse morte devait correspondre une ville morte.

A mysterious equation established itself. To the dead wife there must correspond a dead town.

The point is underlined by the inclusion of a number of black-and-white photographs of the city, looking still and silent, and often including unidentified figures. A modern reader can't help seeing the effect as Sebaldian.

But anyway, however interesting this early use of photography may be, the real star is Rodenbach's prose. He finds a thickly atrabilious style to fit his story, rich in imagery, full of strikingly depressive turns of phrase. The city's canals are 'cold arteries' where 'the great pulse of the sea has stopped beating'; the famous Tour des Halles 'defends itself against the invading night with the gold shield of its sundial'; down below there are streetlamps 'whose wounds bleed into the darkness'.

This must be what people mean when they talk about 'prose-poetry'. There are some paragraphs here that seem to be made up entirely of alexandrines. And then just look at a phrase like this:

Les hautes tours dans leurs frocs de pierre partout allongent leur ombre.

There is a progression of vowels here that slides forward through the mouth beautifully, ending with the wonderful dirge-like assonance of *allongent* and *ombre*; and the consonants travel too, from the silent *h* of *haut*, back in the throat, forward to the *t* of *tours*, on to one lip with the *f* of *frocs*, then both lips for the two *ps*, and finally the lips are pushed right out for the last two nasal vowels. Wowzer! (Translation: something like: 'Everywhere the high towers in their stony habits stretch forth their shadow.')

Earlier this year I read Nerval's *Les Filles du feu*, and I kept being reminded of it while I was reading *Bruges-la-Morte*. There is exactly the same fascination with the 'doubling' of a love interest: one woman becomes two (or more), each taking on different attributes – one is blonde, the other dark, one is pure, the other degraded, one is a virgin the other is a whore, and so on. Some scenes, some lines, are almost identical: Rodenbach must surely have been a Nerval fan. He sums up the poetic essence of this tradition perfectly – indeed so perfectly that I found the formalities of plot resolution at the end of the book to be irritatingly drab and melodramatic by contrast. I guess that's the problem with turning poetry into a novel.

Nevertheless, *Bruges-la-Morte* is obviously a high point of Symbolist writing, a book that's obsessed with death and always alert to new ways to externalise deep emotions. There is a brooding openness to the supernatural, and a looming architectural presence, which also has clear links with the Gothic. But more importantly it's just beautifully-written: every sentence drops balanced and gorgeous into your head.

For best results, it should be read at dusk, preferably when it's raining outside. Just make sure you have a brisk walk afterwards.

(Oct 2013)

Svetolik Taštinski says

Kako kaže autor pogovora, Radivoje Konstantinovi?, krajnje jednostavna radnja ovog romana podseća na antičku tragediju. Tekst je protkan jakim simbolima, i kao takav, ima snažnu psihoanalitičku podlogu. I iz naslova se veoma može pretpostaviti da grad igra važnu ulogu u formiranju atmosfere romana, gde on praktično prerasta u zaseban lik (ili zasebnog lika – kad je veoma personifikovan, hah). Ig Vijan, koji je (uz grad) glavni lik, stapa se sa slikom Briža, poistovećuje se s njim, emocionalno je rasparen i ne uspeva da prežali smrt žene. Osim toga, u svemu deluje opsesivno, i to me je u nekim trenucima podsećalo na Andrijevog profesora V. (pripovetka „Znakovi”). Da vam ne bih oktrio o čemu se konkretno radi, reći ću samo da Ig pokušava da stvori način na koji bi, da se izrazim lingvistički, dao oblik svemu onome što ga vezuje za ženu, a to će se dešavati nakon što upozna drugu osobu koja neobično liči na njegovu umrlu dragu. Tada do izražaja dolazi i fantastično u romanu, kroz način na koji Ig zamišlja i oseća stvarnost, a očituje se kroz njegovu opsesivnost.

Prvim delom romana dominira atmosfera koja je možda na rubu patetike, ali takav poletak ispostavio se vrlo funkcionalnim u odnosu na ono što sledi, te ga ne bih odredio kao manjkavost stila. Tek sam se nakon čitanja, tj. posle vraćanja na ono što sam beležio, uz sugestije iz pogovora, jače osvestio o neke detalje iz vrlo detaljnih opisa gradskog pejzaža, koji su važni da bi se moglo kretati među nekim motivima, odnosno simbolima koje Rodenbach provlači kroz ceo roman.

Nakon čitanja, naročito me je zaintrigiralo saznanje iz pogovora o tome da Gaston Bašlar analizira ovaj roman u svojoj knjizi „Voda i snovi”. Možda ta informacija zaintrigira i vas. :)

Vittorio Ducoli says

Tra simbolismo e melodramma: l'opaco specchio di un'epoca

Bruges la morta è l'opera più celebre di Georges Rodenbach, scrittore belga di lingua francese che visse nella seconda metà del XIX secolo, oggi praticamente ignorato dalla nostra editoria ma che ha avuto una grande influenza sulla letteratura italiana (e non solo) del primo '900, in particolare sui *crepuscolari*.

Il breve romanzo è ambientato, come dice il titolo, in una delle più belle città belghe, Bruges; chiunque vi sia stato ne ha sicuramente subito il fascino. Oggi la città fa parte dei circuiti turistici internazionali, per cui è difficilissimo coglierne quelle atmosfere raccolte ed intime che il romanzo ci consegna; tuttavia, se si ha la fortuna di visitarla *fuori stagione* o se (come a Venezia) si abbandonano le strade principali occupate per metà dagli ombrelloni dei bar e dei ristoranti e per l'altra metà da torme di turisti chiassosi, intenti per lo più a farsi dei *selfie*, e ci si rifugia in qualche vicolo solitario magari fiancheggiato da uno dei tanti canali, è ancora possibile immergersi nel clima di dolce ed infinita decadenza che la caratterizza. Come per tutte le città *morte*, questo clima ha origini estremamente concrete: nasce dalla decadenza dell'importanza economica della città; nel caso di Bruges deriva dall'insabbiamento del canale che la congiungeva al mare, avvenuto alla fine del XIV secolo, che aveva spostato l'asse dei traffici commerciali dell'area verso la vicina Anversa. Come ci dice l'esempio clamoroso di Venezia, ma in generale quello di tantissime altre città italiane, è questo il modo migliore per conservare intatto o quasi l'assetto urbanistico di una città e per conferirle un'atmosfera irreale, quasi magica, che solo l'ignoranza di un nuovo sviluppo convulso e fenomeni come il turismo di massa possono distruggere.

Al tempo di Rodenbach Bruges era davvero una città *morta*, ancora non sfiorata dallo sviluppo dell'economia

industriale, che attraverso i suoi monumenti medievali riverberava i bagliori di uno splendore spentosi per sempre. È proprio questa atmosfera che Rodenbach ci vuole trasmettere, non come un supporto alla storia che narra, ma come elemento essenziale di questa storia, come fattore principale che la determina.

Nell'*Avvertenza* posta all'inizio del romanzo Rodenbach dice infatti: *"In questo studio passionale, abbiamo voluto anche e soprattutto evocare una Città, la Città come un personaggio essenziale, associato agli stati d'animo, che consiglia, dissuade, decide d'agire."* Il ruolo essenziale di Bruges è evidente sin dal titolo, significativamente riferentesi alla città: anche se la storia narrata è storia della morte di persone, l'elemento essenziale è il luogo in cui si svolge, è il fatto che questa storia si può svolgere solo in una città *morta*.

La storia narrata è quella di Hugues Viane, un agiato quarantenne che cinque anni prima ha perso l'amatissima moglie: allora egli decise di andare a vivere a Bruges, città in sintonia con il suo inconsolabile stato d'animo. Nella sua grande abitazione conserva come reliquie, in una stanza dove neppure la fedele domestica Barbe può entrare sola, alcuni ritratti della moglie morta e soprattutto, in una teca di cristallo, una lunga ciocca dei suoi biondi capelli.

Una sera, mentre passeggia per la città brumosa, nota una giovane donna che gli appare identica alla moglie: scopre che si tratta di una ballerina di teatro, la conosce e diviene il suo amante. Nonostante sia divenuto l'oggetto preferito dei pettegolezzi della piccola e bigotta città, egli è sereno, perché considera la sua nuova relazione come un insperato rinnovarsi del suo amore matrimoniale, e vede in Jane Scott la *reincarnazione* della morta. Senza parlarle del suo passato, costringe Jane a somigliare sempre più alla moglie, sino a farle portare i vestiti di lei. Quando si rende conto che Jane è un essere volgare, che tra l'altro lo tradisce, cerca di lasciarla, ma non ci riesce per l'attrazione carnale che sente verso di lei; la vicenda volgerà rapidamente in tragedia.

I cinefili avranno sicuramente ravvisato in questa breve trama le affinità della storia con quella narrata da Alfred Hitchcock in *Vertigo*, a testimonianza dell'influsso che *Bruges la morta* ha avuto nel '900 sia in letteratura, sia nella musica, sia nel cinema.

Il giudizio che mi sento di dare su questo breve romanzo è ambivalente. Senza dubbio Rodenbach possedeva una notevole maestria di scrittura, che gli permette davvero di farci percepire il silenzio dei vicoli di Bruges rotti soltanto dal suono ossessivo delle campane o dallo scalpaccio di qualche anziano che passa frettolosamente, la bruma e la pioggerellina del nord che avvolgono la città, il contrasto tra il colore plumbeo dei canali e l'abbagliante biancore dei cigni che vi nuotano. Mallarmé, amico di Rodenbach, parla in una lettera indirizzata all'autore di *"...poesia, infinita in sé ma... che si prolunga con più fierezza nella prosa"*. Questa *poesia in prosa* è anche davvero capace di farci percepire Bruges come un personaggio, il protagonista vero della storia, paradossalmente viva del suo essere morta. Altri elementi di fascino del romanzo, sempre legati al *contesto*, sono costituiti dal genuino tratteggio del personaggio di Barbe, forse la figura più *vera* che si incontra nella storia, e il ruolo svolto dall'indistinto brusio dei pettegoli abitanti della città. I veri punti deboli sono rappresentati a mio avviso dai due protagonisti, che appaiono essere poco più che dei bozzetti. Hugues sembra essere una sorta di appendice umana dell'atmosfera di Bruges, sottolineando con la *ritualità* dei suoi comportamenti che il vero protagonista non è lui. Jane è poco più che uno schizzo della *classica* donna volgare e volta solo a sfruttare economicamente chi l'ama. Il protagonismo di Bruges deriva quindi anche dalle indubbie lacune della storia in sé, che toccano il culmine nel melodrammatico finale, che rappresenta a mio avviso una notevole caduta di tono.

Al di là di queste osservazioni sugli aspetti per così dire *tecnici* del romanzo, credo sia importante riflettere sulla sua collocazione rispetto al contesto culturale in cui viene concepito. Rodenbach è, se così si può dire, un *decadente della seconda generazione*, che ha come maestri dichiarati Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud, ma a differenza di questi è un *piccolo decadente*: vede come unica risposta alla crisi degli ideali borghesi della fine dell'800 il rifugio in un *piccolo mondo antico* rappresentato dalle sue amate Fiandre, ed in particolare in questo romanzo da Bruges. Bruges è il rifiuto della modernità, è il simbolo (il romanzo è intriso del nascente simbolismo) di un mondo perduto, nel quale i ritmi sono ancora scanditi dagli elementi naturali, nel quale il tempo è sospeso. Rodenbach è cosciente che questo mondo è *morto*, che anche in questa atmosfera rarefatta si annidano i germi della corruzione sociale, ma quando si tratta di risolvere questa contrapposizione tra un

buon passato e un *malvagio presente* non sa andare oltre lo stereotipo, il poco convincente melodramma. Questi elementi, provincialismo, rifugio nel *particolare*, accento melodrammatico, spiegano a mio avviso l'influsso che *Bruges la morta* esercitò in particolare sui movimenti letterari del primo novecento di un paese periferico ed arretrato come l'Italia.

Giustamente Paola Dècina Lombardi, nella bella introduzione – che però a mio avviso tralascia alcuni aspetti essenziali del rapporto tra le opere letterarie di questo periodo così importante per la cultura europea ed il contesto sociale e politico che lo ha generato - azzarda il paragone con un grande classico, scritto una ventina d'anni dopo, in cui sono protagonisti una città decadente e la morte. Ne *La morte a Venezia* di Mann il senso del disfacimento di un'epoca è espresso al massimo livello, anche tenendo conto del fatto che qui siamo già in pieno novecento: c'è una precisa corrispondenza tra quanto Mann voleva comunicarci con quella grandiosa metafora ed i mezzi che usa per fare ciò. Questa corrispondenza, questa misura, mancano a mio avviso in *Bruges la morta*, ed è questo che fa la differenza tra un capolavoro ed un discreto romanzo.

Resta, dopo averlo letto, la voglia di tornare a Bruges, magari in novembre, per vedere se è ancora possibile, nonostante tutto, perdersi nella sua infinita tristezza di città *morta*.

Chiamartini95 says

Huges é un uomo dall'animo triste e angosciato, incapace di affrontare il lutto della moglie amata vive nella sua ombra, passando gli anni della sua vita fra le reliquie della defunta.

Vivendo in un limbo fra vita e morte, le giornate di Huges scorrono impassibili, allietate esclusivamente dal riflesso dei sentimenti dell'uomo nella città in cui vive: Bruges.

Bruges infatti altro non è che la raffigurazione dell'animo di Huges, grigia nebulosa, malinconica ma allo stesso tempo affascinante Bruges diviene agli occhi del protagonista la città dei non-vivi, di coloro che, spezzati dai dolori dalla vita, attendono pazientemente la morte.

In uno dei tanti momenti di malinconia per le grigie strade di Bruges, Huges ha un apparizione, spettatore di quello che pare essere un evento miracoloso rivede la propria amata passeggiare; egli sa che non può essere lei bensì semplicemente una donna molto somigliante eppure dentro di lui nasce l'idea di poter rivedere in quella estranea la propria amata.

Huges entra quindi in una spirale di follia, inebriato dalla ricomparsa della propria moglie vive nell'illusione che quella sconosciuta sia la sua copia tornata in vita, tuttavia l'uomo presto si dovrà scontrare con la realtà uscendone dilaniato e sconfitto.

Classico della letteratura belga, questo romanzo è una perla che era andata perduta della letteratura decadentista, attraverso una prosa poetica e malinconica siamo catapultati in una città grigia e sofferente che influenza la vita di un uomo altrettanto buia e inquieta.

una_sussa says

Bruges la-morte, pubblicato nel 1892, è un breve romanzo fortemente allegorico. Come le "corrispondenze" di Baudelaire si riferiscono al tempio della natura, foresta di simboli, così in Rodenbach le corrispondenze, le somiglianze, eleggono a tempio la città di Bruges, emblema decadente di un passato che non può tornare; Hugues, il protagonista, ne sceglie e predilige il grigiore funereo, che è continuazione della morte della moglie, ma l'ossessione della somiglianza innesca un processo ancora più funesto che rende doppia anche la morte, sotto gli occhi giudicanti della città, la "soror dolorosa" che esige solitudine.

Jim says

This short novel bears a startling resemblance to Alfred Hitchcock's film **Vertigo** and to the Boileau and Narcejac novel upon which it is based **D'Entre les Morts**). Having lost his wife, Hugues Viane moves to the melancholy city of Bruges in Belgium where he lives a somber life morosely contemplating his loss some five years ago. His house has become, in effect, a museum dedicated to her with the same furniture, the clothing, paintings, and -- most highly prized of all -- a braided blonde tress from her head. As author Georges Rodenbach writes in the opening chapters:

Equally beautiful and beloved in its former days, the city was the virtual incarnation of Hugues's own loss. Bruges was his wife, while she was Bruges. Their destinies were joined together. This was Bruges-la-Morte, the dead city, entombed in its stone quays, the arteries of its canals chilled to death at the cessation of the great heartbeat of the sea. [*Rodenbach refers to the fact that Bruges was once a seaport.*]

As in the Hitchcock film, Viane runs into the living image of his wife -- a dancer from Lille named Jane Scott. He starts seeing her, to the scandal of the locals who are familiar with him. What happens is that our hero wants to see in Jane a replacement for the lost wife (who is never named, but ever present, in the book). He even takes a trunk of old clothing to the apartment he has rented for Jane and tries to make her over in his wife's image.

As in **Vertigo** when Madeleine Elster refuses to assume the persona that Scottie wants her to, Jane resists the transformation. But whereas Madeleine really was the same person, Jane Scott is a different individual altogether. And the difference becomes more noticeable as time passes:

Hugues had experienced a great disillusionment since the day he had that strange whim of putting Jane in one of his wife's old-fashioned dresses. He had gone too far. Through wanting to unite the two women, their resemblance had diminished. The delusion was possible so long as they remained far removed from each other, separated by the mist of death. Drawn too close together, the differences appeared.

There is a climactic scene during a famous religious procession which Jane wishes to view from Hugues's balcony. When she appears at the window, the town is scandalized; and Hugues pulls her back. What happens next you will have to find out from this unfortunately neglected little book, which it will take you only an hour or so to read.

Dolors says

My real trip to Bruges took place when I got home after visiting the actual city, when I gathered enough momentum to submit to Rodenbach's pulsating testimony of the kind of beauty that can only be found in death, like one can sense in certain places such as the somber cathedrals, the towering belfries, the pebbled alleys and greyish quays that compose the skeleton of Bruges, once a decadent city brought back to life by the refined pen of a Symbolist's contemplation.

Hugues Viane is a disconsolate widower who has found a matchless companion in the lonely melancholy of

Bruges, a city whose glorious days of trade have waned into a suffocating atmosphere of religious conservatism. Haunted by memories of his deceased wife, Viane roams the streets of Bruges in silent conversation with its canals, chiming bells and austere convents, absorbed by his inexhaustible despair until he crosses paths with Jane, a young actress who bears a strong resemblance with his beloved. Spurred by his mysterious connection with the dormant city, Viane indulges in a deranged fantasy that takes him into a downward spiral towards a climatic ending that explores the link between death, conscience and grief.

Rodenbach's evocation of Bruges is more than an attempt to paint an accurate landscape for Hugues' mourning but a deliberate effort to thread a perturbing analogy between the city and the states of mind of a man lost in the morbid eroticism of venerating a dead woman in a living corpse. Bruges becomes the mute narrator and the ultimate protagonist of the story, Hugues the mirror that refracts it to the reader and Jane, a grotesque object disguised as *femme fatale* that gives a Gothic touch to the outcome of the novel.

Tragedy can already be anticipated in the opening paragraph, but plotline is totally superfluous in this case. It's the stylistic delivery of foretold events merging with the internalized perceptions of its main character that makes this book a chilling but strangely delicate experience, that creates the impression of a pagan ritual branded in darkly sensuous poetry that tempts and hypnotizes the reader, leaving him helpless and levitating in suspended tension, in the ache of pleasure momentarily achieved but never truly possessed.

I recently took a stroll around the medieval alleys of Bruges, crossed its bridges and admired the quays, over-brimming with waves of tourists and pearly white swans, but it was through Rodenbach's aesthetic vision that I finally met the true soul of this town in all its withered splendor and somber beauty of past blending with present, of introspective art fused with metaphorical precision.

Nate D says

The morbid obsession of an inconsolable bereavement, and the dual mapping of that loss onto city streets, fog-bound and empty, and onto a new living object, innocent of the simulacrum she's been forced to become. Or the book doesn't really see her as innocent, casting her as a somewhat blandly archetypal manipulative harlot, but really who wouldn't fair poorly under the projected image of a lover who is unable to see her at all behind the other he has lost? Still, the streets of Bruges have a slow-burning mystery here, and a well-wrought background of fanatical Catholic disapproval that builds to fever in the culminating Holy Blood procession. Eerie and poetic, this was a key text of the Belgian Symbolists, admired by Huysmans and Mallarmé with obvious cause.

Incidentally, this edition was published by Atlas Press, committed translators and reissuers of so many otherwise lost surrealist, symbolist, and dada texts. Their edition also reproduces Rodenbach's photos of Bruges, as they appeared in the original publication. Symbolist painter Fernand Knopff, also of Bruges, did the original frontispiece, and later did his own versions, ghostly and elegaic, of several of the photos:

Shawn says

BRUGES LA MORTE is a slim novel telling the story of a man who, mourning his dead wife, moves to the Belgian city of Bruges, a city seemingly designed to mope in. Mist and fog blanket the cobblestone causeways and chilly canals watched over by brooding stone cathedrals from whose towers peal endless, mournful bells.

You may think I'm being satirical but, actually, this is a great, atmospheric read. Our narrator is shocked to pass a woman in the street who looks exactly like his dead wife (this book is sometimes cited as an inspiration for the book that inspired VERTIGO). After casting around for her fruitlessly in the gloomy streets, he finally finds her and starts up a relationship, albeit a slightly awkward one as it has to incorporate his fetishistic shrine to her already passed predecessor. And things get a little more complicated when her character is discovered to be nothing like the pure, sainted memory of the wife, as this new version is nothing but a common *actress* (hiss the word with me!) who dares to do things like have fun and dance around in the clothes of the ever-lost "Lenore". What happens to a fetishist when he finally gets what he wants, but it's not exactly what he wants (because what he really wants is for his fixation to never change, and thus be inert and dead)? You may be right if you guess....

Worth searching out for those wanting a nice gloomy masterpiece of dark imagination that touches on the decadent and fantastic.

juan carlos says

Una gran novela que mezcla poesía y horror.

Un hombre obsesionado con reencontrar a su amada en el cuerpo de una mujer hace que pierda el sentido y la lógica de sus acciones a total grado que su destino estará enmarcado en sangre, en muerte y en soledad.

Un libro que me sorprendió integramente y me dejó con la boca abierta con ese final. Una gran historia de terror para suspirar y saber que la sangre y la muerte son compañeras estupendas del género del horror y el suspenso.

Dagio_maya says

Grigio topo

Hugues Viane è vedovo e non si dà pace per la sua perdita.
Sceglie di andare a vivere a Bruges non a caso:

”Un’equazione misteriosa si era creata: alla sposa morta doveva corrispondere una città morta. Il suo lutto immenso esigeva uno scenario adeguato. Solo qui la vita gli era sopportabile. C’era venuto d’istinto. Il mondo, altrove, continuasse pure ad agitarsi, a fremere, ad accendere le sue feste, a intrecciare le sue mille voci. A lui occorrevo un infinito silenzio e un’esistenza tanto monotona da non dargli quasi più la sensazione di vivere.”

Nella quiete cittadina data dall'assenza di vitalità, Hugues perpetua il ricordo dell'amata conservando e venerando alcune reliquie tra cui una treccia conservata sotto vetro.

Bruges è come la morta poiché anch'essa vive sepolta sotto la pietra e nella rigidità di pensiero delle Beghine.

Come dice l'autore nella prefazione, tuttavia, la città non è solo lo scenario ideale ma protagonista stessa dell'azione:

"In questo studio delle passioni abbiamo voluto comunque e soprattutto evocare una Città, la Città come personaggio necessario, che partecipa agli stati d'animo, consiglia, dissuade, spinge all'azione. Così – come nella realtà – questa Bruges che abbiamo scelta appare quasi umana. Il suo influsso si trasmette a tutti quelli che vi soggiornano. Li modella a immagine dei suoi paesaggi e delle sue campane. Questo volevamo suggerire: è la Città stessa che orienta l'azione; i paesaggi urbani non sono più soltanto fondali dipinti, motivi scelti un po' arbitrariamente, ma prendono parte anch'essi alla storia."

L'incontro con una donna assolutamente somigliante alla moglie morta sarà un momento di svolta.

Il concetto di somiglianza quindi torna ad essere centrale in questa classico simbolista del belga Georges Rodenbach (1892).

Hugues vuole perpetuare il suo dolore e trova la città ideale che traspira e rinnova quotidianamente la sua tristezza.

Jane Scott -la donna così somigliante alla morta- concretizza un ideale, ossia quello di rappresentare una novità perpetuando al tempo stesso il bisogno dell'abitudine:

"L'uomo si stanca di possedere lo stesso bene. Non si apprezza la felicità, così come la salute, se non attraverso la sua negazione. E l'amore stesso consiste nella propria intermittenza. Ora, la somiglianza è precisamente ciò che armonizza in noi queste due esigenze, dando voce a entrambe e congiungendole in un punto imprecisato. La somiglianza è la linea d'orizzonte fra l'abitudine e la novità. Questa particolare raffinatezza opera soprattutto in amore: con l'incanto del sopraggiungere di una donna nuova che somigli all'antica. "

Ben presto, tuttavia, Hugues riapre gli occhi accorgendosi che era tutta un'illusione.

Le differenze si accentuano e lui desidera tornare a perpetuare la sua sofferenza.

Un meccanismo, tuttavia, si è messo in atto e il dramma è il solo l'epilogo che può avere una storia grigio topo.

Curiosità: il romanzo fu spunto per il film "Vertigo" ("La donna che visse due volte") di Alfred Hitchcock.
