

The Strange Odyssey of Pierre Mac Orlan

by Andy Merrifield

The little lane in front of the house is deserted. It's late afternoon, a few days into the New Year, and darkness is creeping in. Snow is still thick on the ground from yesterday's storm, a carpeting that left much of the Seine-et-Marne *département* glowing in luminescent white. I trample through the slush listening to the wind whistle through the trees, feeling its icy chill, and approach the entrance of a house that backs onto the willow-banked Petit Morin River. Everything is at once tranquil and eerie, fitting for the life and oeuvre of its former occupant, who resided within its ancient walls for over forty years, walls that seemed to drape around him like a familiar overcoat. The main entrance is only a footstep from the roadside and a stone plaque to the right immortalizes "Pierre Mac Orlan, 1882-1970," the writer who once joked that he was the only Goncourt Académicien who opened the door himself.

His was a life of adventures more clandestine than spectacular, and I marvel at the ordinariness of this brick abode that stands austere and silent. So this is where the diminutive scribe, the Péronne native, who had a penchant for berets with little pom-poms, for tam-o'-shanters, finally ended up. Behind its walls, sitting at his large wooden desk, he penned scores of novels, a few of which made it to the big screen; adventure stories about pirates and outcasts; journalism and essays and memoirs that spanned both World Wars; and poems about misty quays, sailors' bars and mysterious women of the night that became music serenaded on the accordion and sung by Juliette Gréco, Monique Morelli and Germaine Montero.

In his youth, Mac Orlan embarked on strange roamings, vowing to become a painter, traveling far and wide: to Montmartre and Le Havre, to Brest and Rouen, to Marseilles and Metz, to Cologne and Berlin, to Naples and London, to Bruges and Copenhagen, to Morocco and Tunisia. In turn-of-the-century Paris, he befriended Picasso, Modigliani, and Apollinaire, almost got himself killed in the Great War, and reported from the front as Hitler's darkness swept in. He once interviewed Mussolini for the radio, fraternized with the Foreign Legion in Tunis, and retained a life-long passion for Rugby. Mac Orlan basked under a *lumière froide* and became a veritable visitor at midnight, a voyager whose odyssey eventually did transport him back to Ithaca, to the village of Saint-Cyr-sur-Morin, where his real adventures would soon begin.

I'm here hot on his tracks in deep winter, mesmerized by his meanderings, mingling in his slightly foxed universe. I've come to "Musée des Pays de Seine-et-Marne," located near the center of Saint-Cyr, whose "Salle Mac Orlan," a whole floor devoted to the man's life and work, is the museum's crowning glory and the focal point of my homage. His is a legacy in which gentle meditative types can reclaim lost ground in an age commandeered by men of action and war, whose adventures tend to be chemical and explosive, manufactured by the ad men. Above all, Mac Orlan can teach us

how to live out the best adventures of all: those inside our own minds and within the pages of a well-thumbed book.

The exhibit is larger than I originally imagined, situated in an airy space, well lit and dust-free. The walls are packed with black-and-white photographs of Mac Orlan, some by Robert Doisneau and Man Ray, as well as cartoons and extracts from his own notebooks. There are headphone stations and TV screens to tune into his music and to glimpse the old raconteur himself in front the camera. In the middle of the floor, there's a glass cabinet with many first editions, some illustrated by the author, treasures left open at key pages, screaming out for inspection. Opposite, against a far wall, similarly behind secure glass, is a presentation of Mac Orlan's assorted berets, brightly colored in red and yellow, in green and blue, and in tartan, with their little pom-poms still twinkling—"pom-poms of fantasy," as Mac Orlan coined them. The tartan, of course, is a characteristic Mac Orlan indulgence, along with the knickerbockers. Around 1905, after discovering his grandmother's (probably apocryphal) Scottish ancestry, the erstwhile Monsieur Dumarchey, the wannabe painter and avid Anglophile, reinvented himself as the writer Monsieur Mac Orlan, the Celtic nom de plume destined to figure on his identity card and on all those wonderful yellowing books before me.

One of the smallest and most intriguing of these books hails from 1920. Its simple black-and-white dusk jacket is a refreshing antidote to the hard sell of today's book business, where books do seem to be judged by their flashy, multicolored covers. Moreover, even by Mac Orlan's deft touch—he rarely scribbled any work beyond 250 pages—the *Petit Manuel du Parfait Aventurier* is slender. And yet, somehow, the essay soars to tome-like proportions. Within the space of 60-or-so tight leaves, Mac Orlan's whole life-spirit is laid bare. In it, he presents some compelling, if offbeat, notions about adventure: "It's necessary to establish, as a law, that adventure doesn't exist. It is in the imagination of those who pursue it and is effaced when one believes they've found it, and when one holds it, it's not worth looking at."

Adventure, Mac Orlan said, is more about *fantastique social*, and his novels, like his life, brim with just that. The *fantastique social* is a sensibility neither supernatural nor paranormal, but profoundly everyday, reserved for back streets and damaged people, for twilight nooks and crannies, for shadowy bars and taverns, often adjacent to water, frequently animated by liquor, and invariably dramatized by departure, departures never made. One glimpsed the fantastic for a thrilling instant, tapped its hidden recesses by tapping the idiosyncrasies of the imagination. "To give an explanation to the fantastic," Mac Orlan said, "is a difficult thing. All explanations of the fantastic are, besides,

arbitrary. The fantastic, like adventure, only exists in the imagination of those who search for it. One reaches, by chance, the goal of adventure. Try as one does to penetrate its aura, the mysterious elements that populate it disappear." And, "Like there exists an adventurer, active without imagination and often insensible, all the less endowed with a feeling that escapes us, there are creative people in the shadow of the fantastic who themselves participate a little in the impressions of some privileged onlooker."

These privileged onlookers Mac Orlan christened "passive adventurers," who stand in direct contrast to "active adventurers." Such latter types are men of action who ran off with the Foreign Legion, joined the colonial infantry, set sail with the navy, climbed mountains, went up in balloons. Active adventurers explore to forget, to seek fortune, to find distraction. They desperately "need to conquer,"



Paris, 1922. ©Frank and Frances Carpenter Collection (Library of Congress).

Mac Orlan says. For the active adventurer, "certain traits are essential: the total absence of imagination and of sensibility. He doesn't fear death because he can't explain it; but he fears those who are clearly stronger than him." However, without the passive adventurer the active adventurer would be nothing. Passive adventurers are more fastidious, more cerebral explorers, more studious and solitary, reading a lot and dreaming often, taking to the pen rather than the high sea. Their voyages are commonplace, more carefully chosen, less risky: cities and cabarets, burlesque and books, wine and song, love and hate, intimacy and death. They never learned to swim but probably play the accordion and know every sailor shanty. They're impractical, follow sports yet don't actually participate in any. Passive adventuring is an art form, "a question of intellectual gymnastics, understanding everyday exercises and practicing the methodology of the imagination." "If I had to raise a statue of Captain Kidd," Mac Orlan quipped in his *Petit Manuel*, "I would put up at the foot of the monument the gentle and meditative figure of Robert Louis Stevenson, the immortal author of *Treasure Island*."

The conflicting impulse of passive and active adventuring underwrites Mac Orlan's oeuvre, just as it underwrote

his own life, his pre- and post-St.-Cyr existence. "This domination of the past," he said in *Villes* (1929), another little Mac Orlan gem I can see glistening within that glass cabinet, "is intolerable. One dissipates its magic spell by giving it a congruent literary form." *Villes* is a charming memoir that gives congruent literary form to Mac Orlan's vagabond years between 1899 and 1927. A typical mixture of rhetoric and reality, it evokes wandering and seaports, grubby back streets and shady, twilight characters, all of which hark back to another age, to a sentimental education seldom found on any latter-day curriculum. "When I arrived in Rouen," Mac Orlan recalls, "I'd hitherto been content to sleep in railway stations and, occasionally, in haystacks which were no less disagreeable than sleeping in the sheltered hollow of a trench or in a barn without a roof. Entering the rue des Charrettes, I was buoyed by optimism because, graced by my one-hundred and twenty francs every month, I hoped to conquer the city between midnight and three in the morning. These somnolent city lights drove me to mingle in its nocturnal secret life." Mac Orlan's voice here resonates with a rich tonality of innocence; *Villes* is a writer's adventure story: turning its pages kindles the imagination like the chance turning of an unknown street corner.

Nocturnal street corners wend and weft their way through *Villes*. As we leaf through its time-served pages, beat-up personalities and nettle-ridden paving stones invade our living rooms and possess our minds. Suddenly, somehow, we find ourselves foisted backwards to fin-de-siècle Montmartre, outside the Lapin Agile tavern, sauntering along the rue Saint-Vincent in summertime, or loitering in winter at the Place du Tertre, feeling its icy chill penetrate our threadbare overcoat and undernourished body. In Mac Orlan's Montmartre, "dancehalls and the specious appearance of an ancient little village distil into a subtle poison of laziness and insomnia." Here, in Montmartre, "the most commonly known physical and cerebral malaise flaunts itself in carpet-slippers," while "women, pimps, knives and alcohol rendezvous under an arbor decorated in honeysuckle." "These Montmartre days and nights," he says, "piled up and blended together like tarnished trinkets in an old junk shop. Days frittered away like lamps that shone no more; nights wore out like gloomy velvet curtains; twilights faded. But all that crammed happily into my memory and would later serve me. It's in earning a living that I acquired the consoling power to write a few books."

Villes also invites us to smell the sea at Brest and to stroll down rue de Siam, "a river whose waters are richly populated and whose catch is always fruitful." In Brest, under a sky of prehistoric gray, we can hear foghorns and the clatter of clogs, and can push open the shutters of bars that want to surrender themselves to sea. "One doesn't come to Brest," writes Mac Orlan, "to enjoy life, to flaunt an elegant dress, or to recuperate in the sun; other reasons, those the sea doesn't ignore, lead men and women towards this city without liners or departures. For it's here where adventure wafts like a bellowing salty breeze." Pungent adventures likewise waft across the Channel in *Villes*,

to London's Commercial Road, where, with Mac Orlan, we can reenact scenes from *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and where, "at midnight, a cold and luminous sadness seizes you by the shoulders or touches you high on the arms like a police baton." "In this long and naked street, permeated with a vague odor of opium and gin, under dazzling and sterile lamplight, there is," he says, "just me and my shadow."

In *Villes*, we wander melancholically a step behind Mac Orlan's shadowy presence. Or we can pursue him to Strasbourg, or to Cologne, or to Mainz, sit beside him on a café terrace overlooking the Rhine and sip a warming vintage red. "In a little Baccharach tavern, placed under the sign of Bacchus and Jehovah, I drank some Rudesheimer red, which resembled our wines of the Rhône. There are certain sharp and harsh Rhine wines that smell of frogs; the red Rudesheimer was living like fire. We held out our frozen hands in front of a glass whose crimson flame kindled a thousand eloquent embers."

Villes is a veritable field-guide to Mac Orlan's enchanting urban labyrinth, a cascading array of back-alleys and mangled memories, of wounded warriors and warped waysides. The narrative drift seems factual but the driving force is Mac Orlan's own *noblesse de phrase*. "Misery in Naples, in London, in Hamburg, in Berlin, in Paris, in Barcelona, in Anvers," he says mid-way through *Villes*, "reveals itself through intimate details profoundly imprinted on memory. It's relatively easy to be stirred and to write about a city after having touched the picturesque of its neighborhoods. Tragedy often mingles with the familiar odors of the street. Misery plunges everybody and everything into an infinitely mysterious mist that permits the imagination to create literary characters more living than the living themselves."

These literary characters participate in adventures both existential and historical. They descend into the grisly depths of human yearning while they scale the fantastical heights of quotidian experience. As Mac Orlan invents them in his febrile imagination, and as they all fumble with the keys of the Pandora's box of adventure, these characters dramatize the paradoxes within author himself. Thus, pirates and Legionnaires, soldiers and sailors, pimps and tormented women of the night, the lost and lonely, all negotiate their passive and active predilections.

In these stories, atmosphere plays a lead role; Mac Orlan, the ex-painter, always stressed that images, rather than ideas, inspired his fiction. His dramas unfold amid rich descriptive detail that weave itself into the narrative thread: faces and expressions, moods and colors, lights and shadows, mist and odors, all give the reader presence in the text; you can literally smell the sour rum and feel the rhythms of Mac Orlan's lyricism lapping against the bows of a moored three-master. Such an atmosphere is palpable in one of the few Mac Orlan tales ever to make English translation: Malcolm Cowley's *On Board the Morning Star*, the American critic's 1924 rendering of *A Bord de l'Etoile Matutine*.

Motifs of hardship and savage adventure bristle in two of Mac Orlan's best-known books, *Le Quai des Brumes* (1927) and *La Bandera* (1931), stories that made the big screen in the late 1930s, with Jean Gabin, the heartthrob-brooder, starring in each. Both books, like other Mac Orlan fiction appearing in the 1930s, delve deep into the inter-war Zeitgeist,

portraying the tragedy and the promise, the hopes and desolation, of a whole generation of men and women indelibly scarred by the Great War. They seemed afraid to step forward even while they knew there was no turning back. They'd been off fighting a war, a wretched war, and now they returned to a peace that ushered in little more than desperate poverty and existential emptiness. Nothing remained of that old world, of that old familiarity. The old have no past and the youth no future.

Lost Dostoevskian underground men fill Mac Orlan's canvas here, introspective and taciturn antiheroes, like *Le Quai des Brumes*'s Jean Rabe, who dreams of a beefsteak and a little warmth, of a modest room of his own somewhere, with a few books and a good woman. He drinks at a Montmartre café of an old acquaintance, Frédéric, borrows a few sous, and encounters a weird coterie of twilight figures: a deserter raving about past campaigns; Zabel, a butcher who ekes out a miserable existence and ends up guillotined for a revenge murder; Michel, a struggling German artist who, listening to his favorite gypsy waltz, eventually strings himself up. Rabe also encounters Nelly, a past flame, the novel's only true survivor and positive light, who emerges from the shadows as the strong-woman-heroine already glimpsed in Mac Orlan's earlier *La Cavalière Elsa* (1921) and *La Vénus Internationale* (1923).

Nelly, though, is more melancholy and street-wise than the female-soldier-spies of Elsa and Vénus Internationale, the standard bearers of post-1917 revolutionary hopes. "Nelly is fine," he says, "a beauty clearly Parisian. She's truly a street urchin elevated to grand power. Her mouth is the pale mouth of the street, and her eyes, hard and gray, have taken their definitive radiance from a curious life observed between the hours of midnight and 3 a.m." Her face is "rumpled by misery, love, insomnia, and she has a gastric complaint brought on by a surfeit of charcuterie, hard-boiled eggs, and alcohol." She and Rabe spend a single night together; yet they yearn for companionship rather than sex. In the morning, after parting, Rabe's world spirals downwards, just as Nelly's blooms. He, losing all confidence in his destiny, re-enlists, and in a bizarre incident is gunned down in the field by his own captain. Nelly, meanwhile, finds new spirit, a new gaiety, from somewhere, and emancipates herself in the city of night, a night that increasingly resonates with the sound of jazz and dancing. "Here's another night," she muses. "But tonight all is new around me: the men are new, the women are born again by a single bolt after a storm; the music is new, as is the atmosphere that revivifies me." "Ought I be," she asks herself, "so powerful?"

Elsa had uttered a similar refrain, and responded affirmatively. "I'm going to close my eyes," she says in *La Cavalière Elsa*, "and when I open them again this will be Paris... imagine the shops overflowing with precious things. So much elegance is going to be born in this blue mist." Elsa Grünberg, the said knight on horseback, a Joan of Arc figure, incarnated the essence of womanhood for Mac Orlan—its virtues and vices—just as she incarnated the

essence of Paris, a fragile modern island afloat in an ocean of pre-modern backwardness. "Elsa will only represent what you're able to conceive," somebody says in *La Cavalière Elsa*. "She's a little aristocrat, a whore, a sister of mercy, the heart of everyone, our mother, our cousin. She's an orphan, a fiancée, or a wife. Choose..." And yet, we sense menace stalking her, as it stalked Europe itself, as it stalked Claude de Flandre, the peddler-cum-Soviet agent who wore the sobriquet "La Vénus Internationale."

A telling moment in *La Vénus Internationale* has Mathieu Raynold, the jaded publisher, remark: "A man lives two existences. Until the age of 45 he absorbs the elements surrounding him. Then, all of a sudden, it's over; he doesn't absorb anything more. Thereafter he lives the duplicate of his first existence, and tries to tally the succeeding days with the rhythms and odors of his earlier active life." Mac Orlan's songs, compiled well after his 45th birthday, during the 1950s, represent such an attempt to tally his two existences, to tally his active and passive selves, to unite a past obliterated by bombs and bombast with a future that lamented the snows of yesteryear while gladly bidding them farewell. Mac Orlan's tunes, those penny poems put to music, are intimate journeys through ruins—through old Le Havre and Rouen, through Brest and Naples, through London and Paris—and recapture an everyday sentimentality of a lost epoch of streets and hoodlums.



Two women in flower market, Paris, France (1925 or 1926). ©Frances Benjamin Johnston Collection (Library of Congress).

"Songs," Mac Orlan wrote in his compilation, *Chansons pour accordéon* (1953), "suffice to be good conductors of adventure. They may even be what adventure produces best." Those songs are here, all right, at the "Salle Mac Orlan," for everybody to listen to, on headphone stations equipped with seats and pamphlets detailing each lyric. On a small video screen you can also watch Monique Morelli and Germaine Montero sitting at sad dingy bar tables crooning to old melancholy locals, or standing under deserted bridges at midnight rasping about men and misery, or bawling merrily to packed bistros full of soldiers and sailors. The vocals somehow let you experience a world beyond language itself. As Georges Brassens once said, "Mac Orlan's songs give memories to those who don't have any."

"Where are the kids of the street," one song, "A Sainte-Savine," laments, "those little hoodlums of Paris/ Their adolescence busted/ By the prejudices of midnight?/ Where are the gals of Sainte-Savine/ Singing in dancehalls aglow?" Mac Orlan's stanzas are riming and rhythmic, stained with stale beer, and tumble along like barroom brawls where nobody really gets hurt. They're laments about the big one

that got away, about unrequited love in faraway ports of every departure. In his songs, memories coagulate and other adventures gush forth, imaginary adventures, because "everyone," he says, "can conserve their warmth, either in your head or in your skin."

When Céline received critical acclaim in 1932 for his *Journey to the End of the Night*, he'd been right to admit that Mac Orlan had already been there, had already seen all, understood all, invented all. Mac Orlan had been there and made it back to tell the tale, cast under his cold light, a light that never darkened into nightmarish despair nor degenerated into tepid cynicism. The songs, the essays, the memoirs, the bundles of photographs adorning the walls everywhere around me, and those novels spanning almost half a century, provide living testimony to Mac Orlan's strange odyssey, an odyssey that knew "a blood stain, perceived by chance at the threshold of a door mistakenly opened, is unfortunately more terrifying than all the blood spilt during war." But now, for today, I know that my own personal Mac Orlan odyssey, which has taken me across an ocean and propelled me into another time warp, perhaps into another universe, must come to an end.

Overwhelmed from my day at the Salle Mac Orlan, a moving and unforgettable experience, later that evening I follow the advice of Museum's curator, Madame Baron, and eat at "Le Plat d'Étain Hôtel" in Jouarre, a five-minute car ride away. In the shadow of the 7th century Benedictine Abbey of Notre-Dame, Le Plat d'Étain stands smack in the center of town; since 1968 it's been in the caring hands of Jacky and Huguette Legrand. Monsieur le patron is a portly, jovial man with a small white moustache, who greets diners at the door in a bowtie. The "pewter plate" itself rests proudly on the wall in the modest *salle à manger*, which, as per custom in France, is hushed and well lit. The Beef Bourguignon tasted all the better knowing I'd actually been sitting in Mac Orlan's old pew. "Oh yes, he was a former regular," Monsieur Legrand told me enthusiastically. "He'd sit over there with his friends, wearing his bonnet, puffing on his pipe. He loved to eat well and to tell stories, and was always polite and full of life." It was over thirty years ago but Monsieur Legrand recalled it like yesterday. He was happy I'd come and glad to know that somebody was still writing about old Monsieur Mac Orlan, the local writer whose memory is consecrated everywhere around here. I was happy that Monsieur Legrand was happy.

Exiting into the freezing night air, out onto a gray square devoid of anybody, I remembered a passage from *Villes*, a passage I was beginning to understand first-hand since moving to France and since embarking on my Mac Orlan odyssey. "It is the finest quality of the French," he'd said, "that they can render agreeable a block of houses, a few farms, two or three lamplights, and a sad café where you can die of boredom playing dominoes. It isn't so much that, on this vast earth, the French are nicer than anybody else, but more that they know how to bring a bit of pleasantry to their little existence." As I continue to get nearer to Mac Orlan, and pursue my own active and passive adventures, this homily not only rings true; that cold light of his also becomes evermore warming. **BR**