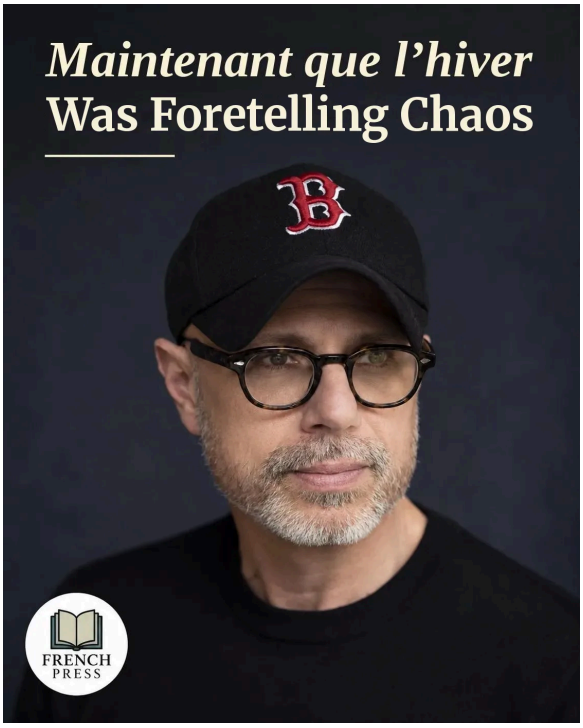
ESSAY

Maintenant que l'hiver Was Foretelling Chaos

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This novel was born of a sense of unease at the deteriorating state of our country, as well as of a melancholy brought on by the consequences of the profound political, cultural, and moral crisis we are going through.



There are times when fiction precedes reality, and the recent riots in France have reaffirmed something that was already at work in my previous novel, *Maintenant que l'hiver*, published by Rivages in January 2024.

This novel was born of a sense of unease at the deteriorating state of our country, as well as of a melancholy brought on by the consequences of the profound political, cultural, and moral crisis we are going through. Conceived as the projection of a major anthropological shift, gradual for a long time and barely visible to the eye of denial, I imagined this novel as the story of an individual and collective abandonment, with the

intimate as the counterpart of the social—not the societal or its particularisms—in which, for lack of civilizational cohesion and even a minimally subjective historical vision, we have been immersed for at least four decades.

The narrative framework of this book gradually took shape, disguised as a dystopia, in the manner of the *Lettres persanes*, obliquely confronting the prospect of the slide toward the disaster looming over us. This gave me the possibility of satire and of reflecting on the return of the tragic without risking the inquisitorial opprobrium and inevitable censorship that follow as soon as one leaves the well-worn paths of today's impoverished moral orthodoxy.

"History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake," James Joyce said. Now that the violence of the world is catching up with us and spilling into our streets, reaching even our doorsteps, this sentence continues to haunt me. *Maintenant que l'hiver* anticipated the possibility of a cataclysm; and if that possibility remains only a probability, it is no longer honest to blind ourselves or reassure ourselves cheaply by dismissing the story as an exaggeration, when it is becoming less and less dystopian.

My approach consisted in holding up a mirror along the way, taking Stendhal's thought at its word, and writing a novel of farewell to things lost, deliberately abandoned by those very people who claimed to be acting for the best and for perpetual progress. Yet progress never ceases to generate itself in a vacuum, through violence and sectarianism, when universalism and the complexity of memory have been amputated from it.

There is nothing dogmatic or naïve in my work: neither socialist realism nor radicalism. On the contrary, my readings of Tocqueville and my vision of the novel lead me in the opposite direction and counsel me to adopt the distance of the omniscient narrator, so dear to Flaubert, as a literary ethic.

To make things visible has therefore been the principle guiding me since my first book. Certainly, every novel is political. But literature thinks better than politics and the morality of the day. A novel, moreover, when it is fully realized, thinks better than its author as well. Not to pander should be a writer's watchword. Not to avoid displeasing one's contemporaries should be the concern of someone who writes and seeks a more enduring, more demanding complicity with the reader—always awaited, never courted.

In an age when the ideological slogan reigns, when invective claims to take the place of thought, and when the doxa of benevolence and of "betterment"—the enemy of the good—conceals resentment and turns into cowardice, bringing us a little closer to the abyss each year, and since the road to hell continues to be paved with good intentions, refusing to endorse the designation of victims and executioners, conventional archetypes and martyrs, seemed to me to be the foundation of the writing of *Maintenant que l'hiver*.

As in all my novels—for this approach is nothing new to me—it was essential to portray human beings in their ambiguities, to take the measure of the evil and beauty of the world, and to capture a precarious humanity never artificially divided between those deemed virtuous by nature and those condemned by nature. This had to be achieved through work on language and style. Language is embodiment, an imprint.

Unlike what AI can produce, style has its own unconscious and addresses other embodied beings, who also possess an unconscious. What part of the critical establishment seems to have forgotten lies in this almost mystical fact: the spiritus, the breath, must guide the narrative.

There are no good morals in art. You will not find me on the side of morality or of that vast body of literature whose menu consists of victimhood and narcissism, of this age's catechism and its innumerable shortcomings. Have we forgotten that art is amoral, that the writer is an artist, and that the reader must be built up through the narrative, without ever being led, taken by the hand, or manipulated as in some political manifesto?

My purpose here, then, was to defend myself against the prevailing Rousseauism and Robespierrism, against the indiscriminate flow of moralism that never ceases to cloak itself in virtue so as not to encounter its own reflection in the mirror. In my book, I sought to reaffirm that the new man does not exist; that self-generation always represents a totalitarian peril; that the old man never fell from some immaculate state of innocence into degradation; and that evil does not dwell in structures but in souls, which in turn contaminate structures that are necessarily imperfect, necessarily human.

This distrust of the idea of humanity's purity and regeneration, which I see at work in our country and its literature, this competition among particularisms, to borrow the clear-sighted observation of the philosopher Chantal Delsol, gradually took shape in the very substance of my book. The novel is a vanitas. *Maintenant que l'hiver* had to be a vanitas at a time when the idea of finitude seems to have been thrown out with the bathwater, while the spiritual dimension of existence and the questions of transcendence and universality are relegated to the realm of superstition and other outdated aspirations, battered by the messianism of untenable promises.

Coming out of an epidemic whipped into a frenzy bordering on delirium, whose public-health responses plunged us into a totalitarian mimicry akin to China's, my aim was to push to its extreme the suicidal logic of perpetual betterment, to expose the delirium of a civilization exalting its nihilistic tendencies to the point of telling itself that the planet would be better off without us, and to show how the moral failings of capitalism and comfort are made to exact their price in illness and death. In this narrative, I sought to lift the veil on what I imagined was coming: collapse, depletion, devastation, the impoverishment of civilization and knowledge, an unprecedented pauperization in the modern era, stretching back to Gutenberg and the invention of the printing press.

In this atmosphere of the erasure of knowledge, all the way to the blank slate, a mad benevolence and its condescension flourish. "He who plays the angel plays the beast," Pascal said. In this castration of thought and beauty, censorship asserts itself disguised as a salvific prohibition. In the absence of hope and transcendence, the present establishes itself as the alpha and omega of all existence.

This is the novel's subtext, alongside a biblical and metaphysical rereading: it recounts a state of profound abandonment that every life sometimes passes through. "It's for your own good," the adult tells the child, "but you do not yet know how to discern the shape of your own good. How could you distinguish the different forms of goodness and protection we will provide for you?" A society that concerns itself with the

happiness of its citizens, rather than guaranteeing each person the freedom to pursue—or not to pursue—their own intimate ends, to fail or to fulfill themselves, is no longer a democracy. It is a wolf in sheep's clothing. This is the subject of *Maintenant que l'hiver*. These are the fears that drove me to write this novel.

But what kind of abandonment, what farewells, are at work in this text, when the charge of declinism can be readily leveled and one can be consigned, just like that, to the infernal shelves of libraries, left with radio silence as the only response and the only form of dialogue? What collapses did I want to speak of here? What kind of decline can be discussed without being suspected, at bottom, of arising from an impulsive response to the ugly thoughts condemned by the morality of our times and by the ideology of progress? For a writer in his own country is never a prophet in that country when he ventures to warn of the worst, whatever literary path he may appear to be pursuing in his relentless search for his own drama.

Maintenant que l'hiver is a song of defeat. All literature is traversed by such songs. And since language is what creates the new, since it is the flesh of the novel that breathes life into a thought that exceeds its author, here are its narrative thread, its characters, and its symbols. This is why Thomas, the young man in the story, finds himself facing trials that we are only beginning to approach, as one approaches a devastated shore.

In an ancient city whose districts are enclosed within boundaries, a compartmentalized city stretching from the outskirts and suburbs to its center, where an immense Gothic cathedral rises, Thomas struggles to survive. The city is clearly a symbol of a divided country, and the cathedral signals a past that refuses to pass, as Faulkner might have said: the return of the repressed, endlessly repressed. This has led the authorities, swept up in a headlong race toward progressivism, to seize upon what the novel calls the great epidemic as a pretext for accelerating the ideological process of leveling and banning, among other things, the consumption of meat and the use of internal-combustion engines.

But no arbitrary measure in a democracy comes without consequences. One need only remember American Prohibition to understand the trafficking and corruption it engenders.

This young man, then, who used to repair motorcycles, finds himself unemployed in a country subject to uncontrolled immigration, adrift, with people stranded beneath makeshift tents in conditions of utter misery that have nothing to do with the welcome proclaimed in the name of ostentatious and perverse generosity. The country is also experiencing climate change, signaled by an unprecedented winter, harsh and snowy. The snow symbolizes the shroud and the mourning that run throughout the book.

I will pass over the problems of drugs, the importance of AI in manipulating crowds, and the other scourges encountered along the way. Any exhaustive summary, after all, is tedious. At best, a summary entices; at worst, a recapitulation gives away what drives the plot and ultimately dulls the reading experience. The narrative therefore moves briskly from cause to consequence. This young man, poorly educated in intellectual terms because reading and books have long been absent from the city, becomes involved in a trade in meat and migrants in order to survive. He will find himself at the epicenter of several conflagrations and several collapses: his own, Christ-like in its abandonment and linked to the cathedral; and that of the country, which gradually shifts from a dictatorship of benevolence to a military dictatorship, established by the very people who advocated benevolence and the protection of all against all.

The punitive ecological and public-health policies, bringing energy crises and delinquency in their wake, drive the city's outskirts—homogeneous in their population of external origin and already subject to endemic violence—to rise up radically. This uprising, however, is in no way driven by political demands: there is nothing coherent about it, despite the efforts of a far-left leader, dreaming of convergence and revolutionary upheaval, to co-opt it. The uprising is mercantile and consumerist, saturated with resentment and marked by a form of tribalism; it is a murderous, hybrid development that can be called neither a revolution nor a civil war. Cultural emptiness, hatred, an ignorance driven by envy, and spiritual shortcomings—or fanaticism, the reverse side of the same coin—ravage the city and France. Neither its ordinary citizens nor its sequestered elites will escape the devastation caused by the incompetence of an opportunistic and cynical political class.

The novel is stitched together, scarred by borders. Everything is closed off; nature is no longer accessible without a pass and the proper documents. A country whose external borders have collapsed has little choice but to reconstruct them internally, in the form of an absurd and totalitarian mosaic.

Yes, this novel thinks badly today, because it thinks about the contemporary world as it is badly thought. But, at the risk of repeating myself, I believe that a writer must think against the doxa and the spirit of the age, think against himself, and allow himself to be thought by what he writes. This is perhaps how the recent riots and the configuration of our country echo what seemed to be nothing more than a nightmare born in the mind of an isolated author, a prophetic dream into which the usual clichés forbade us to venture. This is perhaps how thinking badly, taking literature's less-traveled paths, ultimately comes to meet reality.

This novel contains many issues that have resurfaced. Nothing can be sustained through permanent denial; everything eventually returns and haunts us, like the deserted cathedral that inhabits the entirety of the narrative, makes its meaning felt through its mere presence, and points to an absence on which, as Lacan would say, one ought to rely. Obviously, the novelist is neither a seer nor a prophet. This is not a matter of playing at oracles, and exactitude is not the ultimate purpose of a work of art. The excesses and blind spots of an era are simply articulated here, and the ruts into which the plot plunges are as old as humanity.

Finally, as reality resurfaces and catches up with fiction, we should not neglect what language itself thinks. The language of *Maintenant que l'hiver*, which, like the cathedral, still echoes something beyond evil and chaos. A language that strives to apprehend beauty or, at the very least, seeks to render its score.

— Olivier Sebban

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