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Tenderness over LSD and morphine

The novel “Œil-de-mer” by Valais-born Corinna Bille is set in Toulon on the Mediterranean and portrays an ecstatic and exhilarating love story.

CHARLES LINSMAYER

It is probably one of the most tender affairs imaginable. On the beach of Le Pradet near Toulon, Marthe, a blonde lady from Valais, is lying face down deep in a book when she starts to feel small pebbles being tossed onto her back every now and again. It is the young deep-sea fisherman Marceau, who is having a bit of fun. When she turns to speak to him, he makes out that he was trying to get rid of an ant on her back.

A love story unfolds between the Swiss woman and the young fisherman that could barely be more tender, gentle or poetic. Lust and eroticism are certainly not overlooked – the pair make love on the beach to the sound of the sea – but there is something chaste and insurmountable between them – she is married and the young fisherman is a million miles away from her in terms of education and social status. The woman from Valais visits Le Pradet for two further summers, her discreet, reserved letters crossing during the winter with his clumsy, love-struck correspondence, and then everything suddenly stops as if nothing had ever happened in the first place.

With “Théoda”, “La Fraise noire”, “La Demoiselle sauvage”, her poems and short stories, Corinna Bille, who was born in Sierre in 1912 and who also died there in 1979, is known for being a poet who turned Valais into a real, imaginary and even mythical setting like nobody else – with the exception of the novel “Œil-de-mer”, which recounts the love story between Marthe and Marceau on the beach of Le Pradet.

The biographical background

“I am unbelievably happy,” she wrote to her mother in Sierre on 22 July 1950. “I’ve found a true friend. He’s a young local fisherman. A simple soul, but absolutely wonderful. He fishes underwater and describes the seabed to me. He looks for bright red starfish for me and tiny mussels which I’m then supposed to eat alive with the shell.”

Corinna Bille spent three summers away from her husband Maurice Chappaz in Le Pradet from 1950 to 1952. By 1951, however, she had her small daughter Marie-Noëlle with her, which would have restricted her flirting with (the now married) Marceau, although she could not quickly forget him. The novel “Œil-de-mer”, which recounts the little love story so charmingly and subtly, was written from wistful memory in winter 1954/55 and rejected by one Parisian

publishing house after another, including Gallimard, Grasset, Julliard and Flammarion. “We were impressed by the fine poetry that pervades the entire novel – poetry of the sea, poetry of love and poetry of longing,” acknowledged Ernest Flammarion in his rejection letter.

Faithful or adulterous?

It was not until 1989, ten years after Corinna Bille’s death, that Maurice Chappaz had the novel, which was part of his wife’s estate, published by the Lausanne-based company “Editions 24 heures”. The author of this article asked Maurice Chappaz in 2008 whether he had been jealous of the fisherman. “I wasn’t jealous because I knew nothing about it,” he replied. “I only found out when I was preparing the novel for publication. But I don’t believe she was really unfaithful. We both knew we could trust one another.”

This does not completely concur with remarks made by Corinna Bille in a later text: “I was unfaithful – in thought if not in deed – and this barely stopped for years. Always madly in love with someone! It was my morphine or LSD, but I have to say that this fantasy helped me to get through life.”



“Back in her room, Marthe found a brown comb in her bathing towel, Marceau’s comb. It had an unusual aroma, both bitter and sweet. No, she was not disgusted by it. “It shows that this man is familiar to me.” Bewildered, she asked herself: “Am I falling in love with him? That’s impossible!” But she knew it was very possible, and an exhilarating shiver passed over her.”

(From chapter three of “Œil-de-mer”.)

Bibliography: “Œil-de-mer” is available in French from “Editions de L’Aire”, Vevey. The Corinna Bille reader in German “Das Vergnügen, eine eigene neue Welt in der Hand zu halten”, Reprinted by Huber No. 25, Huber-Verlag, Frauenfeld 2008, published by Charles Linsmayer, contains a chapter from the novel and an article on its background (translation by Hilde Fieguth).