
Hadrien Laroche

Restitution

Publisher: Flammarion

Date of Publication: August 2009

Foreign Rights Manager:

Patricia Stansfield
pstansfield@flammarion.fr

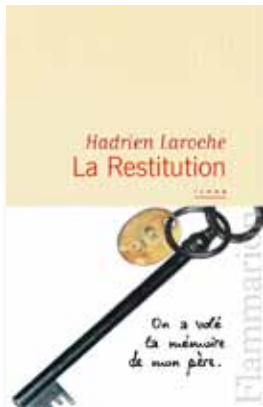
Translation: Adriana Hunter
adriana@hunter157.freemove.co.uk



© Arnaud Février/Flammarion

BIOGRAPHY Born in Paris in 1963 and a former pupil of the École normale supérieure, Hadrien Laroche is the author of an essay on Jean Genet, *Le Dernier Genet* (Seuil, “Fiction & Cie” collection, nominated for the Prix Fémina for best essay, and translated into English and Japanese), as well as several novels. *Restitution* is the last part of a triptych about how “man is orphaned by humanity”.

PUBLICATIONS *Les Hérétiques*, Flammarion, 2006; *Les Orphelins*, Allia, 2005 and *J’ai Lu*, 2006.



Henry Berg was abandoned by his family as a child during the war. He went on to inherit the family fortune then squandered it and erased his identity. His son is now in Vilnius attending a conference on works of art plundered during the Holocaust, and he is staying at the Mona Lisa guest house, the nerve centre for a child trafficking ring. His father's fate is echoed in the stories of despoiled artefacts and the laughter of orphaned children.

Restitution provides a fictional setting to tackle the question of pillage, and is a sometimes uncomfortable exploration of memory, identity and indebtedness.

No one was waiting for me with my name. Vilnius airport is not far from the city, and on the way I could see the driver's name, to the right of his portrait on the licence which was displayed where customers could read it. The Mercedes hurtled down a boulevard and turned twice before going back onto the ring road that took traffic round the old city. Then we turned off into the old town and quite soon came to a stop at a crossroads in its tortuous streets. On paying, I thought I stowed my wallet back in the pocket of my raincoat but actually dropped it straight onto the seat. Black leather on black moleskin: invisible. Before driving away with my wallet on the rear seat of his vehicle, the driver dropped me off under a lamppost outside a hotel that was closed. Great start.

I paced round the building under that yellow light for a good hour. The stone walls suggested not so much an establishment for travellers as a monastery. For a hallucinatory moment, those walls reminded me of my family's imposing house on rue Vivant Denon. Bankers from father to son. No lights at the windows. No one. Luckily a woman came past; I saw her appear a bit further down, at the point where the street turned a corner, a scarf over her head, a shopping bag in her hand, the other hand dangling by her side. It was late and the old woman was going steadily home. She led me two or three streets further on, passing through a small square, along a corridor of scaffolding up against the side of a building, below a wooden roof then across a courtyard where cars were parked. Standing under a porch, she pointed further up the street to the sign for the Mona Lisa guest house.

The reception desk was on the first floor of this Neo-German, alpine style building. The staircase up to reception was steep, and I went up to the counter with my leather suitcase. There was a girl there clattering away on the keyboard

of the computer, surfing on a celebrity site—something like *Hello* or *Okay*—whose pages lit up the screen and beyond. As I leant over the counter, I was met by a sour expression, or rather a serious one, which then softened. Green eyes, black hair. She raised her eyebrows at her visitor: an alert face, pale as milk and alive with thousands of micro-movements. In the depths of the sea the sun's rays glimmer off stones, creating a myriad flashes of coloured light, bright glints of colour that appear to swim through the deep. Lit by the screen which was now back on the guest house homepage, in the glare of this luminescent aquarium, her skin quivered with the nervous energy of a hummingbird. This girl was extraordinarily alive. Then her fingers, with their painted nails, slowly began the registration process. My eyes undulated over her strawberry T-shirt.

"First name?" she asked in English.

"Hen-"

Just as I was giving her my name a blast of noise from the floor above swallowed my words like the goat chomping the telegram in that scene from *Jour de fête*.

"With an 'i'."

"Surname?"

"Berg."

The place did not seem to want an imprint of a credit card or any proof of identity. Just as well. In a language that was foreign to us both, I explained that I was looking for somewhere out of the way, good value and in a lively part of town, that a reservation had been made for me at a nearby hotel, that I had arrived that same evening and found the door shut, and a passer-by had brought me to where I was now. I pointed out that, by telephone, I had secured a very favourable rate in the other establishment and I did not want to pay any more.

"How much can you pay?"

In my native language. Solemnly, detached, with icy determination. It was a gamble. My surprise and a sense of urgency made me name the sum agreed with the other hotel, less fifteen percent.

"We'll sort that out tomorrow," the girl concluded.

What the hell is that little boy doing in the corridor? He should be in bed at this time of night. And what a lot of trophies on the walls of this spiralling staircase! And what a huge bookcase for such a modest guest house! With my raincoat folded over my arm, I slipped into my room on the top floor. It had a sloping wooden ceiling. I was thirsty, and looked around for a glass. In that bare room—table, chair, somewhere to wash, wardrobe, nothing more—there wasn't one. Barefoot, I went back down to reception to ask for one. When I was on the landing, I just glimpsed a man holding a small boy, the adult's hand forming a clamp on the child's forearm. Although the boy made no effort to fight, he did not look happy about being manhandled like that. From behind

I could see a bald head, traditional shooting clothes, a green Loden coat and an alpenstock both dotted with little emblems, and in his free hand an umbrella-cum-shooting stick, just what you need between drives. They both disappeared through a concealed door. On my way down, I picked up from one of the stairs a bendy crocodile, two more or less edible snakes with rings through their noses and a saucer; there was also a small green wax taper. Delicious. I went up to the counter at reception. The computer screen was displaying a diptych. Two photographs, taken at school or in a photo-booth, showing the faces of a girl and a boy of about ten. They were stuck into the digital family album of some sort of kinship, although it was glaringly obvious that there was nothing to connect these representatives of different nationalities, yet it was equally clear that they had more than one feature in common. The green-eyed chamber maid popped out from behind the crimson curtain masking her lodge. She immediately tapped away at the computer keyboard and switched the screen to her precious celebrity site. Still, I did have time to recognise a face in the pair of butterflies pinned to that now hidden virtual page: the little boy with the head of blond hair I had seen earlier being dragged along the corridor by a fist of steel. I looked at her. And she me. Somewhere in our eye contact I could make out the hint of a rich man's joy in the depths of a poor man's eye.

"There isn't a glass in my room. Could I have one please?"

"I'll be right up," the girl replied.

I went back up. A little later someone knocked at my door. Instead of half opening it, putting my hand out and taking the glass, I stepped aside to let the girl in. Holding the glass of water out in front of her in her left hand, she walked into the room and put it down on the desk. She turned round. I asked her name.

"Letitia. Letitia Ann Lew. Pronounced loo," she added, before leaving the room as she had come in, gracefully.

Then I hung up my raincoat which I had thrown onto the bed when I first came in. As I had just seen in the taxi, the pocket of that raincoat had an in-built emptying facility. More of a hole than a pocket. I can genuinely say I throw money down the drain of my raincoat through that pocket. I bought it second-hand, and the circumstances were unusual enough for me to remember them. Every Thursday I go to my butcher in the capital city where the Organisation is based. Three people work in the shop: him, his wife who operates the till, and a solid man who does not look happy to be there, the odd one out. He never serves me as pleasantly as the boss. The woman sits behind the counter beside two refrigerated units at right angles to each other: one for cooked meat, the other for raw. Chickens and ducks roast on spits out on the street. After school their daughter sits on the stool her mother has vacated and leans on the counter reading. They make a thankless trio. He wears a cap, is scrappily shaved and has red blotches on his cheeks; his wife wears glasses with great

thick lenses, and a green hand-knitted woollen pullover. “Chateaubriand!” the boss announces as I come in. “Yes, Mr Meurtdesoif.” And as usual, there in that butcher’s shop, which is on the next street to the second-hand shop, not far from the headquarters of the Organisation that has sent me here on official business, I was given a prime steak yet again. The man in the cap told me what to order. I didn’t dare ask for anything else because it would feel somehow like breaking the contract I had with the peak of the boss’s cap. A tacit agreement that means every Thursday I pay by credit card for a fillet steak which I eat blue. “Finishing the Materoli soon?” Meurtdesoif also asked anxiously when he handed me the credit card machine. At the time the Mission was keeping me busy with the international version of a report called Mattéoli, about how French Jewish property was plundered, in particular the volume devoted to the illicit traffic in and restitution of works of art. The day I ask him for three prime lamb chops from homebred Périgord sheep will be quite a relief. Then I will feel I am exercising my free will. Shifting from chateaubriand to chops would confirm that there is a possibility I can change direction in life. Next I went to the second-hand shop. When I got there I put the dripping chateaubriand, which had been wrapped in paper and slipped into a pink plastic bag, onto a shelf above the till. Butchers do not usually take too much trouble with packaging what they sell. Similarly, they joint carcasses without any fuss, hacking meat the way Moses beat the Rock, without hate or passion. I put my bag with its piece of meat on top of the gloves, close to the ties and wallets, perhaps with the consent of the manager, a man with a bald head, who can keep an eye on things left above the till; most likely I did not ask him at all. I did it to have my hands free so I could flick through the rails of shirts, suits and coats on hangers. It is almost impossible to flick through clothes properly without two free hands. The right hand holds the hanger while the other feels the fabric, opens the collar, checks the brand name and size, runs down the sleeve, fingers the ticket attached to the cuff buttons and notes the price, before going onto the next one and then to the till. That is how I found my second-hand raincoat.

After unpacking my bag in my room, I perched on the dormer window. I smoked a cigarette on the windowsill, looking out over the town’s roofs and the sky overhead. Two women had already welcomed me since I arrived. They had done it kindly but without emotion, as you would with a starving man, by handing him a glass of water. It is not the first time I have lost my papers and money. Last year I lost two credit cards then my own father, twice. I am still alive, though.

Tomorrow I plan to ask Herb if he wouldn’t mind being my bank for a couple of days.