

Paul Zimmer

an excerpt from

Hyacinthe and the Bear

HYACINTHE is dancing with the Bear outside my window again. I can hear them shuffling and rounding on the pavement. Hyacinthe is very old, and I can hear him breathing hard. The Bear groans a little. How many nights have they been out there, turning their circles? Time inches along. How do you measure its passage? Calendars yellow and crumble away. Clocks grow still and stop forever.

How do you measure seven centuries? Count out loud slowly to seven hundred, and imagine one year each time you say a number. Spring, summer, autumn, winter; the good and the bad, the hot and the cold—think of all of this as you say each number. Yes, doing such a thing is impossibly tedious; yet if you were able to bring yourself to do it, you might gain a very small sense of the passage of seven centuries. Seventy decades. Six million, one hundred and thirty-six thousand, two hundred hours. How can conditions and events that occurred all those years and hours ago be recounted? Memories blanched by time, distorted, lost, gone into the cracks and crumbles of whatever rock and residue remain. Documents translated, lost, found, retranslated, obscured, destroyed, lost again, faked, and reinvented until they are utterly distorted or disappear altogether.

Arthur Schlesinger Jr. writes, “The past is a chaos of events and personalities into which we cannot penetrate. It is beyond retrieval and it is beyond reconstruction.” What we have then is a barely reliable motley, a patching together of partial stories, hopes, lies, memories, records, imaginings, and opinions—not a complete record of the “truth,” just some things that suggest narrative, giving a small hint of a time and a place.

*

The Cathars in the Languedoc of France were obliterated, murdered, completely wiped out, “ethnically cleansed” from the earth seven centuries ago. There are no small, historically pertinent bits and pieces of them left—only some spectacular ruins of wind-battered stone ramparts and rubble on jagged peaks in the foothills of the Pyrenees. As far as I can tell, there are no pictures, tools, scriptures, treaties, songs, texts, funereal objects, weapons, boats, jewelry, or utensils left from the lives of these people—only remote ruins on Pyrenean mountaintops. Almost every small trace of the Cathars was burned to cinders, even the bones of these heretics, by the righteous crusaders of the Catholic Church.

What little I have been able to learn of them comes from scattered scholarly references, guide leaflets about the ruins, and local legends. Though the Cathars were Christians, they practiced an aberrant, dualistic faith *in petto*, and apparently their beliefs appealed broadly enough to make them seem a significant threat to the pope. Cathars believed that human beings are embodiments of the tainted souls who were inspired by Satan to revolt in heaven and who were thus driven out and banished to the earth, doomed to live and die here, eternally imprisoned in the form of human or animal bodies.

The Cathars maintained that the only way to escape this predicament was through strict dedication to their belief in a spiritual and physical discipline that would lead at death to a Beatific Vision and immortal life. Baptism was the Cathars’ central rite and the only panacea for the disaster of the Fall. But baptism was not a beginning; it was a conclusion, earned only through a life of extreme constraint and effort. Those ultimately earning this blessing became “Perfects,” who would be accepted into heaven at their deaths, and these constituted the ordained Cathar priesthood on earth. The temporal life of the Perfect was so demanding and perilous (because of persecution by the Inquisition) that many Cathars postponed baptism until they were on their deathbeds. Perfects lived lives of extreme denial—no sex, and no eating meat, cheese, eggs, or milk because these were the products of intercourse. Eating fish was permitted because Cathars believed that marine creatures procreated without coition.

Who can imagine such hearts beating all those centuries ago—the strange yearnings and beliefs of thousands of large and small lives, their forgotten struggles, the rock-bottom desolation of an oppressed population under constant siege? Because they were so relentlessly persecuted they were driven to

construct amazing fortifications, where they could practice their faith and protect themselves, on the most inaccessible peaks of the foothills in the Languedoc.

If I lean out from the balcony of our little house in Puivert in southern France, I can see the remains of a smaller Cathar fortress on a rise just on the other side of the village—crumbled, partially restored walls and turrets, and a square tower built from the rubble by troubadours a century and a half after the massacre of the heretics. There are even more imposing Cathar ruins in the area—Montségur, Peyrepertuse, Quéribus—like dream castles on the endpapers of fairy tale books, rising high into the clouds and mist. One wonders how these ancient people, so restricted by diet and physical regimen, were able to build such formidable structures on the most unapproachable crags. At their finish, when the Cathars were under total siege from the knights of the Inquisition, they were able to hold out in these strongholds for months, even years in some cases, before perishing on the pyres of their doom.

Only a few barely creditable details of their lives have passed down to us. For certain, it is known that they excelled at weaving and farming. Those novitiates who had not yet attained the Beatific Vision and immortal life always bowed down to the ground three times when they encountered a Perfect. Their main food was a vegetable and grain gruel seasoned only with onions and shallots, and they ate fish and fruit in season.

There are, in addition, many bizarre legends and unsupported rumors about Cathars: They wore black robes exclusively and never cut their hair; they consumed in some quantity a hallucinatory soup made of secret mushrooms; they moved about only at night; and if pressed, they could live for weeks on a diet of pulverized stones. It is surmised that the basic symbol of their belief was a circle and that their dances and rituals were essentially circular. Some of the more profane rumors claim that Cathars committed buggery with goats, accounting for their astonishing ability to build on such impossible precipices; that they eliminated waste through their mouths and ears; that they kept pet bears and danced with them in the moonlight. Most of this is balderdash, of course, but the legends endure. The Cathars were buried by the centuries, obscured by time, space, and the church. Their secrets reside in the winds.