





# AUGUST PLINTH reads SELECTED STORIES

and

## THE INCENDIARY OF THE CHARITY BAZAAR

*THE DREAM OF THE ASSASSIN IN PLINTH*

by  
Arthur Fairlie

Throughout the work of August Plinth, both the fiction and the poetry, there is the shadow of a gunman. From “the celibate with a stammer has a hammer” of GRAVY FOR THE NAVY to his 1973 collection of poetry ranging from 1958 to 1972, STATLER HITLER, there is a pungent odor of repressed rage and the *desire* for violence. It is important to note the word *desire*, for none of his protagonists ever permit themselves even to act out a violent event. Violence in Plinth is always a dream; not only do the circumstances surround and enchain the central figures, but their own inhibitions stop them from making even an efficient plan. They are the self-divided figures of Mr. Plinth’s essay “Gandhi/Sade” (*Selected Essays: 1960-1970*), ethically committed to pacifism and benumbed by a kind of hypnotized passivity, but aesthetically on the side of artists of violence like Sade and Hitler.

The Gandhi/Sade is a spectator whose participation is restricted to watching, who is passive, is held in passivity by what he sees; he is spellbound or hypnotized. Psychologists define hypnosis as the filling of the field of attention by one sense only. Instead of the interplay of all the senses in harmony, Gandhi/Sade knows the frustration of being a perpetual eye, an abstraction of the visual, obtained by putting to sleep the rest of the life of the body. The pure knowing subject of modern education, winged cherub without a body, is in a swoon, or dream. Gandhi/Sade is like the moviegoer as perceived by Brecht: “They sit together like men who are asleep but have unquiet dreams. True, they have their eyes open. But they don’t watch, they stare. But they don’t hear, they are transfixed. They look at the stage as if bewitched.”

But although the unknown “Incendiary” and the voice in “Statler Hitler” are transfixed, bewitched, passive, they are nevertheless in inner turmoil: first, because of their passivity, which is like a paralysis; second, because no one recognizes their existence. Violence, the forbidden violence, is the only act they can imagine strong enough to release them from their state of suspension, neither living nor dead, but spellbound. Forbidden violence, which is also impossible violence, since they are *unable* to act. Yet they dream of themselves in furious motion, in the “endless acceleration” of the Henry Ford of *Total Mobil*, who put himself, and a whole world, on wheels. But strapped into their autos, they are still motionless; the auto is

moving, is living, and they are seated, as for Roman burial, entranced within.

Gerald Schnaedelbach, in a review in the *Village Voice*, called the poem “Statler Hitler” “the swansong of Arthur Bremer”. I think this is to overstate the case. It is true that there are certain lines from Bremer’s diaries in the poem, and even certain incidents—the visit to the massage parlor at the start of the poem, the appearance five rows from the podium at the President’s Quebec speech—which could serve as a basis for this interpretation. But I would say that Bremer serves as only one figure in the mosaic which makes up a face more general, more pervasive.

It is true that the grandiose delusions of the lonely nobody is at the very heart of both “Statler Hitler” and the diaries of Arthur Bremer; but it seems to me that there are some crucial differences between assassins like Bremer and Sirhan and Oswald, and the persona in the poem. They are able to act, finally, they direct all their efforts toward *the act*; whereas “Statler Hitler” can only burn with rage and loathing, and despair as well, as his chances all slip through his hands. But these “chances”, like “the silhouette in the black limousine” and the moment in the massage parlor, are never really possible at all for “Statler Hitler”. He is in summary not quite up to a Bremer, or an Oswald, he is one of the millions of men in their boarding house rooms who thrill at the headlines announcing the latest assassination. Someone else is living out their fondest dream, while they look on, in the conditions of anesthesia.

To burn down a church; to destroy the lynch-pin of a nation; to cover the missals with honey and flies; to march in peace demonstrations, and give the Nazi salute at Rolling Stones concerts; these are the figures which form a picture of the underside of the American psyche in a way that the Kennedys serve as the official picture. Statler Hitler and the Incendiary, like Bremer, conceive of themselves as an American hero, and Plinth has assembled his image of the “hero” from the available found objects that decorate the landscape of popular culture. His poems of delusion coincide with the commercial mythologies; “it is as if he had broken down a thousand television melodramas into their component parts and then had put them back together in a surreal collage.” (*Harpers*, January 1973)

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SELECTED STORIES

- 1.- SIMON OF THE PILLAR
- 2.- FEMME FATALE
- 3.- HISTORY OF THE POPES