

# Grotesques

**Paul van Ostaijen**

**An extract pp (3-10)**

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## Between Fire & Water

Around ten p.m., after we have been travelling for three hours, we arrive at a railroad junction. Two gentlemen get out. A lady gets in. She sits down diagonally across from me, then next to me.

I sit with my book, which sometimes I read, sometimes I don't. Yet such travel literature leaves a strong impression. The others talk. A general conversation that is dropped and then started again between two people.

The lady presses my foot. That is a mistake, of course. But on a train you try your best to believe in adventures. That's why I don't believe it to be a mistake. Though I am positive it is. Everything is strange in a railway car. You ride and yet you can throw the ashes of your cigar in an ashtray. Like home. That is marvelous, because it is so complex and so simple. That is indeed a beautiful complex: simple and complex.

Around eleven a gentleman asks if he may put out the lights. Of course, why not? If I am reading? Not really, I can sleep just as well. Everyone makes an imperative gesture, let us sleep! Everyone squirms in corners. Where there is no corner you try to make one. It doesn't work of course. It is a mathematical attempt.

I don't sleep. I definitely don't sleep. I am still, though not sensually clear – my eyes are closed, too – quite conscious of space. That is to say, a gentleman is sitting across from me, there is an unlit lamp. Only where the lady is sitting does this sense of consciousness become rather opaque. Yet I hear very clearly the movements of anyone who stirs, etc. I do not make the effort to bring isolated observations to a general conception. I become aware where the noise comes from, so it can be assumed that I am still quite alert. Yet I know that I am neither asleep nor awake. If you are awake, all objects of the reality you perceive appear finally in a general harmony or disharmony. What I am presently aware of must be separate occurrences. But it is remarkable that I no longer try to unite them in an absolute image. And as far as I can remember, one must ascribe this to a lack of energy for ordering things, described in a naïve physiological manner as a superior brain authority. I am still clearly conscious of this: with a small plus it is different. But I no longer assess a plus. Indeed, my energy to order things doesn't exert itself that much. This energy is precisely more than this plus which would change everything, and therefore I cannot determine it any further. Obviously a function has been cancelled, probably between an observation which in itself cannot properly be called sensual any longer, and a superior authority for generalization. The occurrences in the compartment are such that they appear to me in reality to be commonplace and at the same time fantastic, hence again the cancellation of the attempts to establish a more exact knowledge of

the relationships. These occurrences are taking place, I perceive them, and since I am not asleep I register this perception, and since I am not awake there follows no further physiological-psychological induction. The best way to put it is that it is like a stone which falls into water without creating circles. Only what follows proceeds from this intelligible situation: just now I am meditating about this curious situation. For a moment I want to pin down what it is, for a moment I want to create clarity for myself. Then I have this sensation of a candle which does not need to be blown out in order not to give light any longer, but which suddenly simply goes out for no reason and without awakening in me the desire to exact a reason. In like manner I do not pursue my reflections about my situation any longer. Where and how did this thread break? And surely another motif follows this meditation, just as in a waking state when thought draws the most arbitrary arabesques about perception, the past, and desire, a situation which Poe masterfully objectified in his *Murders in the Rue Morgue*.

And here I have to clarify again my state of mind in relation to sleeping and waking. When you are alone and left to your own thoughts, then this process which we shall call "mind," for short, follows often an equally apparent chance direction, the arabesques which proceed across memory, perception and desire appear equally improvised. This is independent from an *immediate* mental orientation, which can be proved by the fact that a sudden observation is worked out by this arabesque. For example: I think of a dead friend, but suddenly my stroll brings me past a beautiful house and from this house my thought-arabesque rolls over houses, architecture and gothic, when it seems suddenly and without apparent reason to be broken because I was mumbling something about Plato. Several days ago I read a sentence somewhere which went as follows: the Gothic is the predication of the spirit over nature. Hence Plato is a gothic man. Intelligent psychoanalysts, however, can follow this arabesque for quite awhile and suddenly throw the thinking man the result of their pursuit, which coincides with his meditation at that moment. Poe pointed this out long before the psychoanalytic method. He described such a case so precisely that you wonder whether science is really so fantastic, or whether fantasy is so scientific. Is this a possibility, that this arabesque which I cautiously said was apparently accidental and which can be followed quite precisely by a second one, is a conclusive proof for a casual relationship – especially since the second one, as in Poe, does not have any pretensions of being telepathy or even intuition, but develops it as a very cerebral function? If so, we can only speak of an individually determined being, i.e., an artist passes a house, and it is individually and deterministically concluded that he will retain this observation in his thought process. An officer who passes the same house, his head full of strategy, does perceive the house, but it does not penetrate his knowledge, the way Socrates distinguishes between knowledge and perception. The arabesque of the artist is influenced by this perception which with him has to become knowledge. The arabesque of the officer is not influenced. He who pursues the train of thought of this person has to take refuge in psychoanalytical methods, to take the *individual* personality as center and to proceed from this deductively. This psychologist first has to separate the observations which lie fallow from those which become knowledge, and secondly to compare the observations which have become knowledge once more with the individuality, to arrive at the sum of categorical influence. This is the same process the telepathic object or spiritual medium follows according to the unclear-clear law of a psycho-rhythm. Of both the methodologist and medium compassionate participation is demanded; of the first only analytic-objective, hence a minimum; of the second a maximum, synthetic and subjective. There is here only a difference of degree, of a lower and higher degree, really a large difference, but not a gap. The one is contemplation, the other boundless participation. Boundlessness has here not an anarchistic, but a cosmic, very ordered meaning. The causal chain, however, which excludes chance within its total hegemony, also has its limits. That is to say, how a house shall be interpreted lies causally determined in the individual, but then the house must first be included in the train of thought, and this takes place by means of an apparently casual stroll which cannot be further dissected into elements.

Between this situation and others such as reading a book or writing a letter, there is a difference in details, and this difference points to an inclusion of an apparent chance component in the first case. Here we can deduce the development of the thought process from the first object, by viewing the chance components as a sudden occurrence. In the second situation you return, no matter how much details may distract, to the first object. In the first case completely divergent, in the second case convergent. In the first case the thought is completely self-sufficient, in the second it has always a shadow of a utilitarian purpose, albeit clarity of the thought itself. On the one hand it follows the train of thought, on the other a preconceived goal.

We now come to a special consideration: the difference between this arabesque and a dream. This arabesque has three temporal possibilities, past, present and future in its reach, but it can never place them on one level. *Everything occurs in sequence.* You think of a friend, suddenly you see a house, you create an image of an architecture of the future. Everything appears sequentially tied together by transitions which have, so to speak, causal fortuity and fortuitous causality. This arabesque never arrives at a grotesque confusion of temporal possibilities. Only the qualitative difference between them is cancelled out: the past is not a perspective and the future is to be understood as an observation of reality which has become knowledge. It is a true arabesque, without depths, pure flat ornament. It is never a history or an episode, it lacks the linking object which gives occurrences relationship.

It is clear that this arabesque differs from that which usually is called thinking, be it thinking about a single local occurrence or thinking in the philosophical sense. This difference is so clear that in popular speech the arabesque is designated as "dreaming." Someone who thinks this arabesque is interrupted by the question, what is he dreaming about? Popular speech knows very well that the word is used figuratively here, but in this way it expresses quite clearly that this arabesque is a step on the road from thinking to dreaming itself.

With one haul, however, the dream stands much closer to concrete thinking than to the arabesque. The dream too is a systematically insisted history. The dream stands in a directly ambivalent relationship to concrete thinking. The arabesque has no point of view regarding thought. The dream remains hostile to it. The dream is a wish-fulfillment, says Freud. You can go further and say that the dream is an unconscious reaction against the historic, material, conscious aspect of our normal thinking. The dream is the experiencing of the subconscious in such a grotesque manner that it becomes a critique of normal thinking. The arabesque passes over time-nuances with complete indifference. Being now in the past it is suddenly in the future. Yet this needs to be mentioned: the arabesque is always complete in one of these nuances, it is never grotesque and does not melt them into one time. It moves indifferently from the one into the other. The dream is hostile to these classifications which belong to the system of conscious thought and reduces them – sadistic burlesque – to one plan. The dream is a wish-fulfillment and therefore realizes the wishes of the subconscious, nonetheless real, state of mind. You could call this the positive side. The thought of interpreting a precise dream as only physically determined by the position of the body touches upon the reason, not the cause. The interpretation which the dream affords to these physiological emotions remains for a moment still untouched. This interpretation is determined by its ambivalent character in relation to conscious thought. The dream constructs a complete history on what conscious thought would call totally unhistoric grounds. The dream plays everywhere in an ambivalent manner with perceptions and epistemology. A falling feather makes us cry, a meteor which smashes our legs makes us laugh, we encounter a friend in the year 2000 who was dead long before the dream took place. And the dream fights with its own weapons. Just as conscious thought created logic, the dream replies as an ambivalent consequence with the absurd and the burlesque which therefore, absolutely speaking, are no longer absurd or burlesque. I say therefore that the dream has a system which is exactly contrary to conscious existence, the episode in the dream is epistemologically exact in conscious thought. But there is an episode, a generally linking object wherein the anachronisms are but reversed synchronisms. There is indeed one plan.

The arabesque has no plan but her own improvisation. The arabesque is situated on a bypath of ordered thought. The dream is its opposite pole. The arabesque is situated on a bypath and naturally on the road towards the dream. There is however a fourth situation, mine in the railway compartment, which is neither dreaming nor waking. It is situated much deeper in the subconscious and therefore nearer to the dream than the conscious arabesque. It is a bypath from the dream to conscious thought. It has a lesser relationship with the arabesque – something like that of a satellite. If we assign to concrete thought the number 1, then the dream is 4, the arabesque 2 and the aforementioned situation 3. This is their proportional scale.

I can make the situation clearer with a few antitheses. When the sleeping person is awakened he transposes himself slowly from the one world, of sleep, into the other, the so-called outside world – but only *gradually*, no matter how much practice may simplify the process – we wake up at least once daily. It may happen that he is still blabbering words which have a relationship to his dream, and so on. The way I was in the compartment does not allow me to be what is called awakened, only to be disturbed. If I am being disturbed I clearly have the feeling of normal thoughts which are dispersed because of it. If anyone were to ask me for the subject, I would not be able to comply. “That’s true,” someone counters me on this topic, “the dream also has a solid belief – though not conscious – in the concreteness of its thought.” True, but I have a conscious belief and control over it, however. If I accidentally, after a disturbance, retain a thought, the result is, “The lamp doesn’t shine too well – what’s that – is that strange person, etc.”

Neither do I think an arabesque, since in this thinking everything is marvelously clear. It is an arabesque but completely veiled. My situation is not a dream because everything happens sequentially, and the periods of this sequence are mostly cut off by perceptions of the outside world. I already hear the ticket-collector in the corridor, and I am still lucid enough to conclude, “Someone who walks like that has to be the ticket-collector.” But it is really less mental lucidity than the proof that my senses, trained for observation, have still maintained this ability to come quickly to a conclusion. My situation is an arabesque behind a veil, and at the same time an unconscious wish-fulfillment, simultaneous with these realistic observations. The first one wants to prove that I am in an intermediary situation, the second that I really am dreaming, the third that I am simply awake. And all this moves at the same time. While I perceive things from the outside world, businesslike, I weave my arabesque more unconsciously than the one described above, and I transform a wish into its fulfillment.

The woman who is sitting next to me has certainly not been indifferent to me. I feel how she had, while asleep, let her head sink on my shoulder. I do not look up to verify this. I press my eyes shut and also try to sleep. And so I think and follow my veiled arabesque.

Now I suddenly feel that the woman is making a movement and something like a sigh. Then she gets closer...

And my head is stroked by her hand. Ever stroked. *Her fingers which I perceive as being separate*, wander through my hair. And it starts again, ever anew, rhythmic with the jerking of the train, I think quite businesslike. And I think something else in a businesslike fashion: her head rests on my shoulder; because she is sitting to my left, her right arm is pressed between her body and mine; hence she cannot possibly stroke me with it. Her left arm, however, would have to describe too large a circle to reach my head. How does she reach my head?

But she is good. She doesn’t let herself be disturbed and keeps on stroking, probably thinking that I will wake up and stroke her in turn or speak to her. I do not move, for if I were to move I might frighten her, might make her suppose that it is unpleasant to me. I remain seated without moving. But I feel the pressure of her hand becoming stronger and her stroking more loving. Naturally in the meantime I think my arabesque ever further and note sounds in the corridor.

I do not question for a moment that it is she who strokes me. *Her hand is wonderfully soft*. And even big, I seem to feel. But a big female hand is unpleasant, and that’s why I probably do not pursue that thought. I allow everything to happen, waiting until she herself will provide the opportunity

for the resolution, for she must have had a plan when she began. Surely she is developing her plan. She draws my head closer into the reach of her hands.

How will this adventure end, I think. There are so many people on this train, and we definitely will never be alone in our compartment. Yet it is clear that this can only be a train adventure, and once our destination is reached it will no longer be binding. She probably has a lover and no time. She only wants to make use of her journey to have an adventure also. A travelling adventure. I look for ways to bring this adventure to a good end. Not so easy in such a chock-full train. Perhaps the dining car affords possibilities. Yes, that's it. I feel content with the result. Let's get to it! I put my head deeper in her hands. She notices the movement and strokes even harder. Yet strangely enough, she does not attempt the least proximity with her feet.

This is very strange – I have the feeling that I cannot open my eyes because everything would be finished then.

I open my eyes. I see a motionless lump next to me. A won-lost sleeping woman. I look immediately at her left hand, which hangs limp and motionless. I don't have a moment's anger over my misleading dream. Disillusionment, because I imagined things other than they were. More of a quiet wrath for the carelessness of my perception which allowed itself to be deceived.

Deceived! By what? Of course, it was the knob of the heat regulator against which I was perpetually being thrown by the rhythm of the train. There is still a secret hope that I might have made a mistake, and that it wasn't the knob after all. But time rushes by and the woman sleeps on. How can one be that unadventurous?

It is day in the compartment.

I reflect on what has happened during the night. Everything presents itself again as being so natural and – if we can use such a word for a memory – as so completely conceivable to me. Even if I had forgotten the dream I could still rescue some fragments with great difficulty. And I come to the conclusion that it is really wonderful to sit under such a knob. If the subconscious were not a major factor here, you could sit every journey under a knob and enjoy this situation quite happily, which is more than a dream because it is enjoyed in such an extraordinary, conscious manner, i.e., this enjoyment persists also into memory, lively and sensual.

So I think. Then... I discover that the heat regulator is not above my head at all! Only if I stretch my hand out can I reach it.

Above my head seesaws the umbrella of the lady. Quite probably it came slowly into this position during the night.

That I felt the five fingers remains quite incomprehensible to me... And this copper knob is not quite so wonderfully soft either...

The lady wishes to smoke a cigarette. She asks me for a light.

What is a light?

I strike a match into flame.