

Who will tell us about the beginnings of the Tunnel Religion?

By Agnès

Translated from French by Annik

What is there at the start of a religion? A story that stimulates in those who hear it the will to better themselves and seek what is good? An extraordinary character, related to the spiritual world, charismatic guide able to weld a community together? A place of refuge in the heart of the mundane world, linked to ancient traditions? Ordinary individuals facing hard trials, finding in what they experience the strength to love and help each other? Multiple interpretations, a wealth of texts and influences? There is all that in our beloved tale of Beauty and the Beast...

I

At the beginning, the magic of television re-created an old French tale « La Belle et la Bête » telling of the emptiness of prejudice, and the possible union of opposites through love. It was situated in the mythical city for the citizens of the 20th century world: New York, called the City by its inhabitants, like the Romans used to call Rome at the time of its glory.

Cities in general, modern and materialistic, present enough contrasts and different facets for a fantastic world to take place in their midst. Numerous variations on that theme already exist in literature and cinema.

In nowadays' big cities, the maze of the subway, parts of which are hidden from the public, and the remains of ancient quarries offer a choice location to the expression of those contrasts. It's the subterranean ways, the tunnels, the catacombs that allow the evocation of the dark, the mysterious and the magical, or simply the refusal of a world that has forgotten humanity.

New York is particularly well-adapted to the myth. City of the striving people who founded it and gave it life, it harbours a vast « shady » world beside the luxury and international culture it also boasts.

As early as 1980¹, a great lover of the City, Jerome Charyn, created an out-worldly hero, and told of those contrasts in a story published in French in the newspaper *Libération*. Arnold the Geek of New York, half-man half-beast, lives below the city in an organized micro-society, and divides his time between the tunnels extending their maze beneath the streets and the Dover movie theater. « He lives fabulous celluloid dreams in his dark cavern... » says the review.

Also, in New York, a vast « natural » area breathes amidst the buildings and illustrates in a striking way the contrast between nature and artifice, bringing an element of wildness essential to the expression of the need for a more natural and human(e) life. At night that domain doesn't belong to the city-dwellers any more, but to those who hide during the day.

So the heroes of our « Beauty and the Beast TV series » live in tunnels. Above, a hard world rumbles, where crime, avarice and the hardness of social relationships win over tenderness and generosity. It's the world of modernity that gradually erases all traces of the past to replace them with gigantic buildings and profit-making structures. A modernity whose boundless expanding ceaselessly reaches down to and threatens the tunnel world and its Helpers.

Below we find ourselves in a warm, loving and... civilized world. The patriarch, who comes from the Old Continent -an Englishman-, possesses a huge library. That always disorderly library is not a mere set, it expresses the noblest activity of that world's leaders, who are often seen with a book in hand.

¹ First edition. Charyn, Jerome. *Arnold le geek de New York*. Paris. Libération, 1980. 32p

Our heroes read poetry, great classic novels by Dickens or the Brontë sisters, and act Shakespeare's plays; the book is a way of humanizing mankind, as is music, that provides great moments of happiness to the community and its members... We are in a world where children are still raised in the love of books, of intellectual debate and culture in general, raised in the duty of opening their hearts and minds, and in the respect of their duties. That place seems to be the last refuge of the Anglo-Saxon culture.

In addition to the traces left by the founders of Manhattan that are discovered in an official episode, fanfiction authors sometimes make us encounter more ancient civilizations, like Indian tribes, as if to show us how that world is rooted in mankind's most noble past.

Bathed in warm, golden light, the tunnels are the gestating place of the real life. A life with a strong aspiration to moral elevation, as attested by the wonderful spiral staircases filmed in a tilt-up or tilt-down point of view; also those stairs at the heart of the inhabited zone, in Father's library, that thus play the role of axis of that world.

As we go down, the sub-basements and cellars have left place to warm natural dwellings made of caves and caverns, well distributed along narrow galleries. Lower, still, the place is magnified into spectacular, striking speleological surroundings, rather unlikely in the NYC area, even if the existence of quartz crystals² is attested in the state of New York. A huge, fantastic world of rocks and abysses flanked by ancient stairs, where you can find waterfalls, lakes, rivers and crystal mines, sometimes mysteriously receiving a few rays of sun that somehow found their way down through the rocks, despite the depth.

The authors of the show thus find their way back to the mythological traditions that make the subterranean worlds places of spiritual birth and initiation. Caves and caverns are the repositories of the true light, the light that comes from heart and soul. Nothing surprising, then in encountering there a blind seer, whose existence sheds a powerful light onto the paradox of those out-of-the-ordinary-world places. In the prehistoric caves, who are now thought to have held a religious value, like in the dolmenic galleries and the roman crypts, were expressed all the fervor and the abandon to divine powers of which human beings were capable.

II

The first tunnel community was thus born in the second half of the 20th century. It lived in simplicity, promoting love for others, disinterest in material things and equality between its members. The tale of its creation is part of the group's legends, of those stories the children request again and again before going to bed. It tells of Father, cast out of the university, then of the City, sinking into destitution before being saved by a humble street girl. It tells of the first hints of a social organization, of communications, of rules, but still in extreme poverty and precariousness. Then comes the discovery of Vincent by Anna, the barren woman who yet bears the name of a great Celtic fecundity goddess. From that moment the community gets stronger, sets boundaries between right and wrong, and unhealthy members are made to leave. It grows, welcomes new members, lost children in every sense of the word, to whom it brings love and protection. Outside Helpers support and protect the new society. It's the tale of a utopia.

Every outcast can be welcomed in the tunnels, providing he or she manifests the sincere desire to live there by the rules. There's at least a former drunk driver, a prostitute, homeless people, a russian immigrant and many orphans. The Helpers are mostly lower-class people, street singer, hot-dog vendor, newspaper seller, Chinese shopkeeper, carnival magician... Though there are some upper-class Helpers who play a key role and prove very useful, like the doctor or the WASP-heiress lawyer.

It's also the pattern of a secret society. The tunnel society's secret is well kept. Both members and

²Herkimer crystals

Helpers must swear to preserve it faithfully. A whole array of techniques is used, up to the most trivial details, to remain hidden, for the smallest unveiling might destroy the society, annihilate the hope created by the existence of a place where people love each other. For such a place to exist, it only can be discovered through trials, by people who already dreamed about it, or proposed through co-option to chosen people. Thus it can happen for some Helpers, close to each other in the world Above, to ignore that they share the same affiliation, but what joy it is to learn that the good doctor who's looked after you for your whole childhood is a part of it!

Thanks to the Helpers, the relationship between both worlds remains an open, live one. The community isn't focused only on itself, which would be just another form of selfishness. The tunnels can help in bringing more justice to the world, and their members work toward the progress of mankind. Once she is aware of the world Below, Catherine relentlessly seeks to play a useful, positive role in the world Above. Vincent sees her as an essential element of a philanthropic project that through her gains a true substance. He carries that vision to a high level of exigency, even conflicting with Father on the matter and investing Catherine with all of his own desire to influence the outer world.

Even such a generous and protected society can encounter adversity. Temptations from the outer world can bring about lies, violence and pain. As do material riches... or a plague. Charismatic leaders are not omnipotent! That's why it's necessary to bind the community together with ritual and distinctive signs, which must be different from those in the world Above to assert the community's identity.

The main distinction marking the people Below as special is brought by the clothing. There is no practical reason for the clothes to be different. It can be supposed they are either found or given by Helpers. In all cases they should be a worn, shapeless version of those Above. But to be worn by the cave-dwellers they've undergone important changes, even if blue jeans remain easily recognizable. The result isn't without a resemblance to medieval garb, through the shapes and colors that seem to reinforce the notion of a vow of poverty. But they also often show a lot of sophistication in the details, lace, thongs, paddings, patchwork that give an idea of the high level of civilization reached.

The rituals hint to other, more ancient traditions like for example the Winter solstice. Christmas isn't celebrated in the tunnels, at least not in the official tale, but Winterfest is, with its chain of love that has deeply marked the fans' imagination. It's a known tradition, particularly in Nordic countries, where light is celebrated on Yule's day, Dec 21st, though it's not a big celebration elsewhere.

The ritual as recited by Father is well set, it sounds as if it's been refined through years of practise! There are others, some remarkable like the naming ceremony for newborns, some more discreet like Vincent reading the great texts of literature to the children, or shown only fleetingly, like the wedding ceremony. Some are even invented on the spot like the « letters to the dead » ritual proposed by Father, acting as the community's minister. Initiated during young Ellie's funeral, it asserts its vocation to collective appeasement and reassurance.

III

But those places and rituals would only be a baroque decor if they weren't inhabited by a powerful, magical character. True master of the place, protector, builder, teacher, « He comes from a secret place ». As a newborn, he was adopted, nurtured and brought up by a community, of which he has become the cement, and the reason for existing. If one keeps only the structure of that story, its pattern is found similar to several mythological tales.

There are many other abandoned children among the great religious figures. Like, for example, Moses or Krishna. From their stories, and others, it derives that abandonment is the destiny of extraordinary children. Children resulting from the union of a God and a mortal, accepted in neither world, or those

to whom such power has been predicted as to threaten the powers-that-be... In both cases, and despite the abandonment, the very existence of the child reveals itself essential for mankind.

Ours is named Vincent, a name coming from the beginnings of Christianity that means « the Conqueror »³. He's half-man, half-lion. Difficult not to mention the symbolism of the lion, essentially a positive one. A solar symbol, astrology has him reigning over the month of August. Symbol of light, he's the guardian of temples in many civilizations, and sometimes also replaces the dragon as protector of sparkling treasures. The element named by Alchemists Lion, or Sun, or Male, Green Lion, Flying Lion, Ravishing Lion, is one absolutely necessary to the making of gold in the depth and darkness of the athanor. Easy, then to understand why Paracelsus⁴ is so intent on capturing our hero!

Aulu-Gelle, 2nd century Latin author, describes him as a faithful, grateful being, living in a cave away from the world. The lion is also a symbol of justice, accompanying the kings on their thrones. A symbol of courage and nobleness, he adorns the shields of the knights. And it *is* justice, that our Vincent pursues. He doesn't only think of the world on the scale of his cave and his own person, but feels the sufferings of mankind far beyond the tunnels. And he knows the evil inside himself. Confined to the subterranean world, he's the one with the clearest vision of all.

In the Apocalypse, Jesus is mentioned as the « Lion of Juda » (Apoc. 5.5). The *Aberdeen Bestiary* (12th century) presents the lion as an avatar of Christ. He sleeps with his eyes open, thus always watchful. He erases his tracks in the sand by wiping them off with his tail, and symbolizes wisdom. He reanimates his cubs at birth by breathing on them, which reminds of Jesus's miracles. That last aspect was never evoked in our literature of reference (*fanfic, note from the translator*) but there's no doubt the lack will be filled one day!

The Vincent depicted in our show has many other Christic sides. He's 33, he's the Son of the Father, and a woman named Mary stands as his mother. He's loved by a former prostitute named [Magda]Lena. A community of poor people and sinners has found in him a reason for living, and rules for survival. He is good, pure, wise. He can know the thoughts of those he loves. He is in constant rapport with the invisible.

All those aspects of the lion are yet lined with a darker symbolism, in which he also represents evil, and sin. The TV story gradually broaches the subject of the terrible consequences of violence, not only on the victims, but also on the perpetrators. Vincent, who in the first episodes can be seen exterminating without too many qualms those who threaten his love, becomes more and more tormented by the memory of those terrible impulses that make him impersonate both Good and Evil. He wants to act for the good of mankind, but despite his strength he can't find the right way of acting. His interventions lead him to killing. Isn't that the very essence of human condition? The two lions are then bound to fight each other. Our hero feels that inner conflict as a splitting in his personality that drives him to the edge of madness and death.

When Thanatos is there, Eros is never far away. What makes the character so fascinating is the desire that he so strikingly impersonates, whether his own, or the desire projected on him by others. The human part of him allows him to understand and share the relationship men have with their own desire, and that makes him a true mythological figure.

Vincent is torn between his supernatural being and his absolutely human being, two contradictory

³« Vincent » comes from « vincens », gerund form of the Latin verb « vinco » (to vanquish, to conquer), indicating an action not accomplished, but in progress. There's also the adverb « vincenter » (victoriously). Or maybe (suggested by Annik) his name just comes from « vinca », a flower as blue as his eyes!

⁴The real Paracelsus was born Philippus Theophrastus Aureolus Bombastus von Hohenheim, in 1493 in Einsiedeln (Switzerland) and died in 1541. He was an Alchemist and a doctor.

modes of existence that are exasperated when he encounters Love. He loves Catherine without hope, and is tortured by his desire for her. Many fans interpreted his illnesses, in his teens and at the end of Season 2, as caused by sexual frustration, and it seemed logical to all that he'd be brought back to life by a sexual encounter, even if that wasn't the authors' original intention.

He would desperately wish to live in the wide outer spaces, and be only a man, but others expect so much from him that it orients his whole destiny despite his will. There's his community who expects from him incentive and protection, there are the women around him: in addition to Catherine, Lena, Lisa, Diana are concerned, without even mentioning all the fans, fanfic authors and readers who make him an icon of masculinity and virile power. And, last, his two fathers: Jacob Wells the good father, and John Pater the satanic one, who each expect from their child the perpetuation of their own choices. On his person weigh all the aspects of the vital aspirations of human beings: to live, to give life, to transmit.

He is, like every incarnate deity, an hostage to mankind.

IV

That world and that hero elicited wonderment in viewers whose collective unconscious instinctively reacted to the strength of the revisited myths.

It's significant that the third season, good as it was TV-Show-wise, didn't have the same resonance. The myth has tumbled down. With Catherine's death the altruistic project disappears; the lion-man, the visionary being, the inspired leader, the tormented hero fade away. Now Vincent is only a grieving lover, for a long time he remains concentrated on his own problems, before tamely going back to taking care of tunnel concerns. All his ambiguity, his troubles, his violence seem to be rationalized; the tension of desire is only represented by Diana, who doesn't get from Vincent the same response as Catherine did. Father leaves the community for a woman... Mary is hurt by his attitude. The fiction becomes prosaic. The sacred has left place to the profane.

So the story of Vincent and Catherine remains unfinished. On the base of the aired « bible », the fans appropriated the elements they'd been given to see to dig further into various aspects of it... A mass of text (I have the equivalent of 150 000 typed pages of it on my computer) is now available. It would need an in-depth study.

The denouements there don't always respect the mythical aspects of the original text. The stories sometimes show too much hurry in resolving the amorous dilemma or giving Vincent an origin at last; the customs of the American society invade the tunnels: Christmas, New Year, Valentine's Day, engagement, bride's finery, up to the ceremony itself that seems to come straight from a « girly » movie. Many stories seem to pull the characters into a paperback romance or family saga.

But in some of them, facets of Vincent's pseudo-divinity are explored. The magical aspect of the character and his extrasensory abilities are reinforced, his erotic power exalted. Others look into the doubts expressed by Vincent about his humanity and the torments he inflicts upon himself, and broach the subject with sense and sensibility. Or rigorously maintain the tension between the two worlds Below and Above, particularly in the long novellas in which Catherine escapes her tormentor. Some offer a dreamlike universe in accordance with the episodes of the first two seasons.

What's interesting is not so much the fact that there's a happy ending, or the possibility of one, as the fact that there are hundreds of them. As if beside the « canonic » text of the TV show, a multitude of adepts had produced more or less conform « apocryph » texts. Those offer multiple interpretations of the aired events. By revisiting any given episode in various ways, by completing our vision of life in the tunnels, by hypothesing about what might have happened at such or such moment between aired episodes, they function as a commentary, bring interesting complements to the « bible » and allow its

true depth to appear.

Their sheer mass, and the repetition of some particular themes, give a better grasp on the singularity of the original topic. For example the magical nature of caverns and their link with spirituality and the symbolic origin of life has been perceived and often exploited, notably for the conception of the V&C couple's children, or Vincent's many health-cures down in the catacombs. Or also the super-power of Vincent's erotic character that makes several authors compare him, through Catherine's mouth, to a Greek God... And lastly Vincent's birthday, that the fans put at the same time as the celebration of light, just as Christmas was fixed in the 1st Century on the birth day of Mithra, the Undefeated Sun

After so much reading it becomes difficult to sort out what belongs to fanfiction and what belongs to the show's creators and authors. Together, both « canonic » and « apocryph » texts form a whole that, even with its inner contradictions, shows a lot of consistency. A corpus of beliefs that manifests the fandom's adhesion to the values of its favorite show. « Beauty and the Beast » has become a collective cultural creation, as are many societal phenomenonons.

Far from me the idea of making our show the source of a new church. At the base of a church there's a truth, including historical truth, of the main figure and his message, a truth that imposes itself beyond the various legendary elements that often later on feed its practise. We all know that with « Beauty and the Beast TV » we're only in a fiction, mainly written for entertainment purpose.

But as I see, set in the modern world, this supernatural figure who speaks so beautifully of human nature, all the while trying to help it improve itself, I find myself wondering what part the human imaginary plays in religious practise. All the more as we very well know that the Christian religion, to mention only one, has generated throughout its first centuries a multitude of writings that weren't kept in the official corpus, but contributed to the legendary dissemination of the Christ's figure. Today still, we know of many holy stories that we are fairly sure were pure invention.

Basing myself on the common aspects of several ancient religions used to create Vincent's character, I find myself dreaming of an ultimate fanfiction story, one I'd be utterly unable to write. It would tell us how, in that parallel world in which Vincent's existence is historical reality, a cult was born after his death. First a secret one, like a mystery cult, that would eventually spread out in the open as an official church. Several centuries after the time when Vincent really lived, the historical truth will be very difficult to sort out, between the official recountings from the tunnel descendants and the writings of the first disciples, the access to the filmed episodes, only traces having proof value, having become difficult due to the obsolescence of the material supports. In advance, I enjoy the academic debates about how to interpret Vincent's words, the battles over the accuracy of rituals, and endless arguments over Catherine's real, symbolic or fictional death...

Dearly beloved B&B brothers and sisters, I hope I haven't shocked you.