

Jacques Lacomblez – Life and Work

The painter, draftsman, and poet Jacques Lacomblez—born in 1934 in the Brussels district of Ixelles—is one of the most important (and today perhaps *the* most important) representatives of Surrealism in Belgium. Although he never belonged to the Brussels Surrealist group centered around René Magritte and Paul Nougé, he maintained friendly ties with some of its members, just as he did with certain representatives of the second Belgian Surrealist group based in the southern province of Hainaut.

Lacomblez, who lives and works in Brussels, developed a passion for German Romanticism—following the example of numerous other Surrealists—as well as for the music of Richard Wagner and Gustav Mahler, Symbolism, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and—above all—Mallarmé. He also became interested in Surrealism at a very early stage, and later in the "heresy" of the Cathars and certain aspects of Eastern spirituality; at the same time, however, he was drawn to Karl Marx—joining the "Jeunesses communistes" in Belgium in 1950—and to Sigmund Freud, earning him the description of an "atheist mystic." This self-taught artist painted his first Surrealist-inspired works at the age of fifteen, influenced particularly by the painting of Giorgio de Chirico. He exhibited these works for the first time when he was just seventeen. Subsequently, however, he turned away from depicting external subjects and embraced a Romantic form of non-representational art that reveals the influence of Paul Klee and Max Ernst. Around this time, he formed a loose collective with the Belgian painter Jacques Zimmermann (b. 1929) and the Belgian draftswoman (and later painter) Marie Carlier (1920–1986); together, they practiced a lyrical, largely non-representational style of painting dedicated to exploring "inner landscapes." At the same time, Lacomblez began writing poetry—initially modeled on the texts of Jacques Prévert, though he later destroyed these early efforts. Reading the works of Henri Michaux, Maurice Maeterlinck, Saint-Pol Roux, André Breton, and Benjamin Péret steered his poetry in a new direction, with automatic writing playing a significant role.

In 1953, Lacomblez met René Magritte but primarily associated with the latter's Surrealist friends—Paul Colinet, Marcel Lecomte, E.L.T. Mesens, and Paul Nougé (without, as noted, joining their group)—as well as the Hainaut-based Surrealist Marcel Havrenne. Shortly thereafter, he became actively involved in a different collective venture: in 1956, he met Édouard Jaguer, the founder and organizer of the Paris-based international "Phases" movement, which published a journal of the same name. "Phases"—interested in all new developments in the visual arts and literature worldwide, and consequently criticized by some as eclectic—was closely aligned with Surrealism and, around 1960, collaborated closely for a time with the Paris Surrealist group. Lacomblez joined this movement in 1957 and, together with Zimmermann and Carlier, formed the Belgian section of "Phases". Finally, in 1958, he founded his own journal, "Edda", which was closely linked to "Phases"; five issues appeared between the summer of 1958 and October 1964—a publication of which Jaguer later said, that it was "the only publication in Belgium at the time where Surrealism, in all its diversity, expressed itself in the present tense." The first "Phases" exhibition in Belgium was held in Brussels to coincide with the release of the journal's first issue.

The issues of "Edda"—which, much like "Phases" (and echoing its content and format), sought to serve as an international platform for the diversity of the latest experiments in poetry and the visual arts, extending beyond Surrealism in the strict sense—contained not only contributions from the "core" trio of Lacomblez, Zimmermann, and Carlier (later joined by the Belgian poet Georges Gronier) but also numerous texts and images by members of the Paris Surrealist group (Benayoun, Cabanel, Dax, Duprey, Hérold, Lebel, José Pierre, Schuster, Tarnaud, Toyen, and even Breton); by artists and authors associated with or close to "Phases" (Jaguer, van Breedam, Giguère, Novák, Reuterswärd, Vielfaure, etc.); by various Surrealists from Brussels and Hainaut (Broodthaers, Lecomte, Mesens, Havrenne, etc.—though notably excluding Magritte, Nougé, and Scutenaire); by Latin American artists associated with Surrealism such as Gironella, Lam, Langlois, and Llinás; by various Danes (Steen Colding, Wilhelm Freddie, Hans Meyer-Petersen) and Germans (Kalinowski, Klapheck, Hölzer, Oelze, Wols, and above all Karl Otto Götz); and by authors and painters such as Cortázar, Granell, and d'Orgeix. In 1963, Lacomblez faced fierce attacks from young representatives of the emerging third generation of Belgian Surrealists, led by Tom Gutt; owing to its resemblance to

Phases in both appearance and content, *Edda* was dismissed as "the most superfluous magazine in the world." Such disputes, combined with financial difficulties, led to the magazine's discontinuation the following year.

From 1958 onwards, Lacomblez worked closely with Jaguer on organizing various activities and participated in numerous *Phases* exhibitions across Europe, Latin America, and North America over the following decades. Also in 1958, the young painter-poet met André Breton in Paris; he deeply admired Breton and maintained regular contact with him until Breton's death in 1966. A significant number of Lacomblez's paintings—particularly those from the last fifteen years—allude to Breton or incorporate his words or phrases into their titles: *La Forêt interdite ou les fées au vert. André Breton* (1998), *Point du jour, à A.B.* (1998), *En marge de Poisson soluble* (1999, a series of watercolor drawings), *Mais où sont les neiges de demain? André Breton* (2000), *...du luxe et du feu des grandes profondeurs. André Breton* (2001), among others. These works were showcased in a solo exhibition in Brussels in 2001. Breton was impressed by Lacomblez's lyrical painting and, a few years later, included an illustration of his work in the famous anthology *Le Surréalisme et la peinture*. It was also Breton—alongside Marcel Lecomte—who encouraged him in the late 1950s to spend a year in the land of the Cathars, specifically in Montségur, the final refuge of these "heretics" before their brutal extermination by the Pope and the French King in 1244. Here, in southwestern France, Lacomblez befriended the poet Jean Thiercelin, the painter Christian d'Orgeix, and the surrealist draftsman Adrien Dax.

Through numerous visits to Paris and his work as the editor of *Edda*, Lacomblez forged many further friendships with Surrealists from around the world, such as Georges Henein, Wifredo Lam, Robert Benayoun, Jean-Pierre Duprey, and Gérard Legrand. He also became friends with the German painter Karl Otto Götz—whom, incidentally, he still considers one of the most significant painters of his era, bridging the gap between Surrealism and Lyrical Abstraction.

All these names appear among the contributors to *Edda*. Naturally, he participated in the various exhibitions and publications that came about at the time through the collaboration between the Paris Surrealist group and *Phases*. For instance, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, he took part in two major international Surrealist exhibitions: the *Mostra internazionale del surrealismo* at the Galleria Schwarz in Milan in 1959, and the exhibition *Surrealist Intrusion in the Enchanters' Domain* in New York in 1961—the latter organized by Breton and Marcel Duchamp. In 1960—and occasionally thereafter—Lacomblez was among the signatories of several leaflets issued by the Paris Surrealist group. By this time, he had also become acquainted with the Belgian poets and painters Achille Chavée, Jacques Matton, and Urbain Herregodts—figures associated with Surrealism—who also published work in his magazine, *Edda*. Lacomblez's first poetry collection, *L'Aquamanile du vent*, was published in 1962, followed the next year by *Un pays pour la haine des mots*. His friendship with the Surrealist poet Claude Tarnaud, which began in 1963, was significant for him; he shared a great passion for jazz with Tarnaud and Jean Thiercelin. The trio's close circle of acquaintances also included the Argentine writer Julio Cortázar, whom Lacomblez met in 1964 at the major solo exhibition the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels was hosting for him. During that period, he exhibited his work primarily in Paris, Rome, and Denmark, but also in Germany.

A year or two after the end of *Edda*, Lacomblez withdrew from all group activities without, however, renouncing his surrealist convictions. In 1974, he founded his own small publishing house, *L'Empreinte et la Nuit*, which released several of his subsequent poetry collections, including *Grande ligne* and *Filigranes* (both 1974), *L'Agonie l'heure et le vent mêlés* and *Le Balcon sur le fleuve* (both 1975), *Corps cité* (1981), and *Cité de mémoires* (1984). After meeting the Polish artist Antoni Zydroń—who was closely associated with Surrealism—in 1979, the first retrospective of Lacomblez's paintings was held the following year in Poznań, Warsaw, and other Polish cities, facilitated by Zydroń. Three years later, the Musée d'Ixelles in Brussels presented a similar retrospective titled *Jacques Lacomblez. 30 ans d'activité*. Over the next two and a half decades, Lacomblez continued to participate in exhibitions by the *Phases* movement in locations such as Le Havre, Mons, Hanover, Saratoga Springs (USA), and Montreal (Canada). In 1989 (and 1989–90), he was represented in the major retrospective *I surrealisti* (The Surrealists), organized by Arturo Schwarz in Milan and Frankfurt am Main. Another retrospective, *Jacques Lacomblez. De 1950 à 2004*, was held in Brussels in 2004, followed in the autumn of 2009 by a solo exhibition in Saint-Brieuc, Brittany, titled *Jacques

Lacomblez. *Tableaux et œuvres sur papier**. In the interim, his work was featured in the comprehensive exhibition **Le Surréalisme en Belgique 1924–2000**, held in Mons in 2007. His recent solo exhibitions have been held in cities including Paris and Brussels, and a further (dual) retrospective took place in 2012 in Nismes and Villers-les-Deux-Églises, Belgium. Between 1992 and 2011, several additional volumes of poetry by Lacomblez were published—likewise in Brussels and Paris—including **Pour une phrase voilée** (1996), **Le Voyageur immobile** (2001), **Extrême du temps** (2007), **La Nuit défenestrée** (2009), **D'ailleurs le désir** (2010), and **Presque rien** and **Un temps de courte paille** (both 2011). Also noteworthy are **Le Peu quotidien** (2001), a small volume of poetic notes, and **Pages de mégarde** (2008), a collection of reflections. Finally, mention should be made of the 54-minute documentary film **Jacques Lacomblez, marxiste et surréaliste** (France, 2011) by Ludovic Tac.

A frequently cited maxim by Novalis could well serve as the motto for Jacques Lacomblez's body of work—both his visual art and, even more so, his poetry: “The mysterious path leads inwards. Eternity with its worlds, the past and the future, lies within us or nowhere at all”—a tenet the Belgian artist has adopted as the guiding principle of his creative practice. For him, too, the totality of reality—the very essence of the term “Surrealism”—reveals itself through a descent into the depths of the self: into the unconscious, into the night where, as the author of the **Hymns to the Night** famously observed, all opposites are reconciled and all that is separate becomes one. The result of this orientation is an art of profound spirituality, though one that finds a distinctly sensual expression. His aim has always been, in his own words, “to push back the boundaries of the modern marvelous and proclaim infinite freedom.” As a painter, he pursues this vision using consistently small formats (e.g., 65 x 54 cm)—though the works invariably appear far more “monumental” in reproduction. A canvas measuring 120 x 94 cm (such as **Symphonie pour G. Mahler** [1971]) is, by comparison, a rarity.

Music is a significant element of Lacomblez's painting. A great lover of classical and contemporary music, the Belgian artist has dedicated many of his paintings to composers such as Mahler, Sibelius, Xenakis, Feldman, Nono, and Ferneyhough, as well as jazz greats like Thelonious Monk and Ornette Coleman—works such as **En saga – Pour Jean Sibelius** (1960), **Kindertotenlieder** (1969), **Symphonie pour G. Mahler** (1971), and **Feldman, dans l'air** (1992), to name but a few. Yet music serves as a compositional principle in many of his pictures as well; to put it provocatively, they represent painted music—or a kind of fusion of music and painting—of the sort envisioned by Baudelaire: “...what would truly be astonishing,” he wrote in **L'Art romantique**, “is that sound could not suggest color, that colors could not convey the idea of a melody, and that sound and color were incapable of expressing ideas.”

How did Lacomblez's painting evolve, what phases can be distinguished within it, and how might these works be understood? In the early 1950s—as previously mentioned—the seventeen-year-old, still very much an epigone of de Chirico, envisioned desolate landscapes or public squares, as seen in **Liberté de création** (1951). Yet that same year, 1951, marked a radical shift toward entirely non-representational compositions—works that, admittedly, bear little resemblance to his later output. By the mid-1950s, with paintings such as **Le Songe de Novalis** (1955), the artist was moving closer to the distinctive, unmistakable visual language that would become his hallmark.

The work depicts a landscape rendered in shades of blue beneath a deep blue sky, in which an oval celestial body—also painted in blue tones—hovers. What is shown here—again, predominantly in blue—is the interior of this landscape, a mesa, densely packed with a variety of stylized plant and mineral forms, with caves and fissures gaping between them. From this point on, Lacomblez's compositions repeatedly focus on such views of the earth's interior—on inner worlds in general. This aligns perfectly with the spirit of Novalis, a mining expert engaged in exploring the depths of the earth, who nonetheless understood this professional activity in a metaphorical sense as a penetration into the deep layers of the mind and soul. In **La Connaissance du Graal** (1955–56), the interior of a highly abstracted, hieratic figure rises against a black-and-blue sky—partially studded with stars—suggesting a druid or a Celtic deity. In any case, the subject is the legend of the Holy Grail, which is of Celtic origin. The miraculous vessel—taking the form of a bowl, a chalice, or a stone, and guarded by the Grail King and the Grail knights of Arthurian legend—symbolized life-giving feminine forces and energies for the Celts; it represented the unity and harmony of humanity and nature, of the outer and inner worlds—a Golden Age. All of this, it is said, was lost with the demise of Celtic culture—destroyed by the Romans—and the consequent triumph of the patriarchy. The quest for

the Grail, supposedly initiated by the wizard Merlin (a companion of King Arthur), is thus a spiritual search for the lost wholeness of being—or, in the view of alchemists (for whom the Grail vessel and the Philosopher's Stone were identical), a search for enlightenment and perfection. Incidentally, the Cathars are said to have possessed the Grail at one time. It also plays a role in Richard Wagner's operas **Parsifal** and **Lohengrin**; these may well be the sources through which Lacomblez first encountered this ancient myth. Just as enigmatic as the aforementioned figure are the other configurations in the painting: above a pockmarked brown terrain, two isolated forms—floating like islands within the picture plane—defy any quick interpretation. Works dating from 1956–57 (including **Märchenerzählungen I** [Fairy Tales] and **Rheinlied** [Rhine Song]) already feature the rock-like or biomorphic forms and structures characteristic of Lacomblez; **Rheinlied**, for instance, once again depicts something resembling an island—viewed from above—amidst the romantic river.

From 1958 onwards, we encounter soft forms emerging from dark backgrounds—shapes that resemble weathered totem poles and the sunken deities of archaic cultures, or evoke fragmented female bodies, all appearing in a peculiar, almost subterranean light (**La Question** [1958], **Petit dieu écrasé**, **3e leçon des ténèbres** [both 1959]). In the years that followed, Lacomblez's images became brighter—at least for a time—and the structuring of the pictorial surface into horizontal bands or layers appeared for the first time, a feature that would later recur in many of the Belgian artist's paintings. **Le Mégalomane sédentaire** (1964) has an archaic yet slightly ironic air; it is a two-part composition—apparently the head and torso of a highly stylized human figure dissolved into intricate, small-scale structures. (Does this “sedentary megalomaniac” refer to modern civilized man?) **Kindertotenlieder** (1969, Songs on the Death of Children)—the German title alludes to Gustav Mahler's song cycle of the same name (1901–04)—appears as a funerary monument floating in the void beneath a black sun; composed of indefinable mineral forms, it incorporates two suggested skulls flanking a kind of grave—a deeply melancholic image, despite the rainbow glowing in the background.

From about 1971 onwards—and recurring intermittently into the 1980s—geometric-ornamental insertions (which had occasionally appeared even earlier) began to occupy increasingly more space (**Le Gardien des noms** [1971]) or even fill the entire canvas (**La Dialectique de la Nature** [1978], **Things ain't what they use to be** [1983]); this represented a form of “cold” abstraction that, despite its strong presence, remained merely an episode in Lacomblez's body of work. By the late 1980s, we encounter—always in a more or less strictly stylized manner—plant-like forms that allude to growth and life (**Scivias** [1987], a painting whose title refers to the book of the same name by the German mystic Hildegard von Bingen; **Le Jardin aux fées** [1989]). However, the atmosphere of the paintings grows markedly darker as we descend increasingly into the subterranean—into cavernous spaces presenting a bizarre universe of rock formations and crystals, a realm inhabited by fairies and other mythical beings where time stands still or reaches fulfillment (**Tempus erectum** [1991]). It is akin to penetrating the womb of “Mother Earth,” whose interior is revealed through ever-changing cross-sections. Lacomblez appears to take on the role of a speleologist—notably in the **Spéléologies** series (1988), where intertwined structures set against an earthy-brown background conjure up sunken worlds. This underworld, revealed through a cut across the earth's strata, is a realm of death yet simultaneously a space of life; from it, new forms constantly sprout and push upward into the world above. At times, however, these subterranean spaces appear merely as an accumulation of sunken objects disconnected from the world above—as seen, for instance, in **Kalevala** (1992). This image depicts a complex, intricate universe of diverse fossil deposits and rock faces covered in enigmatic traces and abstract signs: perhaps our own world, long after its demise? A similar quality characterizes **Calcinations** (1993), with its multitude of seemingly charred objects—including forms reminiscent of mummies and bodies wrapped in shrouds. It is a long-dead world, a realm of death, yet one that might eventually transform into humus for the emergence of new life. Works created using mixed media on paper—such as **Livre des morts X – Livre des tombeaux I** (1995), part of a larger series—allude explicitly to death and decay; the image shows four open sarcophagi stacked vertically, resting on strips of papyrus inscribed with runes and containing highly abstracted forms. Here, Lacomblez drew direct stylistic inspiration from the visual language of ancient cultures—Egypt, perhaps?—or “primitive” peoples. This also applies to several paintings created shortly thereafter; yet these works—perhaps precisely through their connection to those “primitive” cultures perceived as kindred spirits—exhibit a more life-affirming character and a brighter palette. A case in point

is **Jardins improbables—Jardin dit du Maître de Flémalle** (1997), a composition that evokes the life-giving power of water. (The connection between the painting and the Master of Flémalle—likely the painter Robert Campin (1378–1444), a precursor to Flemish Renaissance painting—remains obscure.)

Then, in Lacomblez's body of work, there begins the long phase of "layered images"—continuing sporadically to this day—that leads us back down into a subterranean world; this realm is now frequently divided into multiple sedimentary strata, above which a surface landscape occasionally appears, rendered in a small, highly stylized manner. Two of the earliest paintings in this series are dedicated to André Breton: **Point du jour, à A.B.** and **La Forêt interdite ou Les Fées au vert, à A.B.** (both 1998). (The latter was also exhibited under the title **La Forêt protégée...**.) **Point du jour** depicts an abstracted landscape at daybreak (as the title suggests); the lower third shows plowed fields viewed from above in pale brown tones, surmounted by a rugged, dark-blue layer of rock marked by notches and scratches. At one point, this rock formation rises—piercing a narrow band of stylized waves—into a light-blue sky reminiscent of a scratched sheet of ice, where a colossal celestial body gleams like a frost flower. Above the furrows—likely a symbol of fertility, further underscored by the symbol of female genitalia embedded within them—two suns are rising. Will the warmth emanating from below—from the womb of the fertile, maternal earth—be strong enough to penetrate the rock barrier and melt the frozen sky? The subterranean world in **La Forêt interdite...** is olive-green; amidst various submerged elements, it contains three roughly square chambers where buried treasures seem to slumber—or perhaps larva-like organisms awaiting their unfolding in the "upper world." The narrow, brownish band above them is more permeable than the rock layer in **Le Point du jour**; within it, one can already discern two forms resembling the golden-yellow shapes, and above them, the suggestion of a rising—or setting?—sun. Dense clouds, rendered in Lacomblez's characteristic stylized manner, cover the olive-green sky. According to the title, then, the scene depicts a forbidden—or protected—forest inhabited by fairies: female elemental spirits of Celtic mythology endowed with higher powers, dwelling in places such as the forests and rocky grottoes that appear in great numbers in Lacomblez's work.

In 2008, the Belgian artist painted a very similar work that also evokes the fairy-tale realm of the fae: **Automne en Brocéliande** (Autumn in Brocéliande). It depicts two layers of earth with contrasting textures in shades of brown, surmounted by an olive-green sky and an almost black sun—one that leaves the viewer uncertain whether it is rising or setting. Relatively lush vegetation sprouts from the broad middle layer of earth, where various elements—such as the furrowed fields and a round form filled with green plants (a promising counterpart to the black sun above, yet one still slumbering in a state of potentiality)—hint at imminent growth. Here, the impenetrable rock layer—brown in this instance—has settled at the bottom of the composition and poses no obstacle to the growth. Is this an "optimistic" painting that heralds abundant life? Its title, **Autumn in Brocéliande**, suggests otherwise. On the other hand, a name like Brocéliande likely holds positive connotations for Lacomblez. It is the ancient name of a legendary forest in Brittany that once served as the setting for a series of tales from the Celtic Arthurian cycle. According to legend, it was in this forest—where he lived as a hermit—that the wizard Merlin encountered the fairy Viviane, and the two fell in love. To bind Merlin to her, the fairy coaxed all his magical secrets from him and enclosed him within a magical circle; although he could have freed himself effortlessly, he resigned himself to captivity out of love.

About two years later, Lacomblez painted the series **Heures pour Agnès Sorel**—essentially a Book of Hours—alluding to the **Heures d'Étienne Chevalier** by the French manuscript illuminator and panel painter Jehan Fouquet (c. 1420–1478/1481), who is considered one of the most significant artists bridging the Late Gothic and Early Renaissance periods. One of Fouquet's models was Agnès Sorel—mistress to King Charles VII and a woman of exceptional intelligence who was also regarded at the time as the most beautiful woman in the world. Another heroine of the Hundred Years' War era was, of course, Joan of Arc. Does Lacomblez see in women such as these a kind of feminine counterweight to the life-denying destructiveness of an age defined by masculinity and patriarchy? Agnès introduced the fashion of the exposed female breast at the French court, and Fouquet painted her with this bared bosom; Lacomblez references this detail in his work **Heures pour Agnès Sorel III—Hommage à Jehan Fouquet**. He presents a landscape featuring three strata of earth; the soft middle layer—encased between hard rock and crystal formations—serves as a tribute to the feminine, a theme underscored by a symbolic female genital form that reappears

higher up, depicted as the interior of a mountain. The seascape above the cross-section of the earth is dominated by a large, luminous celestial body that again echoes the shape of an open vagina and is likely to be interpreted as a moon goddess.

Other "earth-layer" images by Lacomblez—as well as those lacking this specific structure—suggest an optimistic, hopeful view of the world. Examples include **Par les pays transparents** (2005), painted in light tones: a seemingly fertile, almost bucolic landscape viewed from above, traversed by a river and featuring various enigmatic "encrustations." Then there is the deep-blue underwater landscape of **Ultra-lieu** (2007), in which a black sun—partially obscured by a living organism—and what appears to be the moon vie for dominance. Also notable is **Les Leurres Merlin** (2008), with its earthy, fertile textures; rising above them into a night sky is a mysterious construct featuring a glowing red "head" and wing-like appendages—a chimera, a deity, or the wizard Merlin himself? (The painting's title is ambiguous: **le leurre** can mean a lure or decoy, but also an illusion or mirage.) With its symmetrical composition, the work resembles an altar or monument; it is, in any case, a tribute to femininity and fertility, underscored by the reclining crescent moon—a symbol of female deities such as the ancient Greek goddesses Selene and Artemis, both of whom embody growth, fertility, and the protection of women. The circle at the painting's center is traditionally a symbol of wholeness and harmony, unity and perfection. In **L'Épreuve du gué** (2008), organic, plant-like forms—a stylized female genital on the left, and perhaps its male counterpart on the right—rise from a mineral-blue layer of rock or ice into a pitch-black sky. The title of this small painting translates into German as "The Ordeal of the Ford." It is evidently a matter of the transition from the mineral to the plant realm, from the solidified to the living.

Paintings and drawings bear witness to this state of petrification: works in which black suns begin to darken the world (**La Saison noire** [2007]), or where ice or crystal formations take over—as in **Le Temps cristallisé** (2003) or **La Cordillière de cristal** (2007), where attributes of the living and the feminine (such as furrows and green meadows) are crushed by a massive formation of ice crystals. Such depictions of the freezing and dying-off of all life culminate in the painting **Territoires ultimes** (2004); here, above four sedimentary layers that seem to alternate between signaling stasis and potential life, a massive, glowing-red fire scorches the sky—and even a charred, barely recognizable sun. These are "ultimate habitats"—as the title reveals—threatened by a vast emptiness or already destroyed by a conflagration that, ultimately, cannot harm the planet's interior. ("Man is a dash in the book of nature," writes Lacomblez, quoting the German poet Jean Paul alongside the reproduction of this painting in the Saint-Brieuc exhibition catalogue.)

These remarks are, admittedly, tentative attempts to gain some understanding of Lacomblez's imagery; yet they are likely quite inadequate—far too superficial and reductive—for the Belgian artist's pictorial inventions are too complex and ambiguous, as authentically poetic creations shaped by a multitude of cultural-historical traditions, to lend themselves to such simplistic explanations.

A few further remarks on Lacomblez's poetry: Some key sources of inspiration have already been mentioned; of these, Stéphane Mallarmé arguably exerted the most lasting influence on the Belgian poet's work. In a letter to the author of these lines, Lacomblez writes: "I know that my enthusiasm (since the age of eighteen) for Mallarmé's style of writing has led me down certain paths—grammar, the freedom of the word within the structure, the use of allusion, the desire to explore every meaning of a word (ambivalence rather than ambiguity, etc.)—that are somewhat arduous; for, in my view, the poem is a ritual construct demanding that a threshold of intelligibility be crossed. All this without rejecting the path of automatism [...]. Yet for me, that path represents what I would call an 'automatism of asceticism,' rather than the mere jingle-jangle of words and the piling up of outlandish images (at any cost)—results that automatism has all too often produced (except, of course, in the work of Breton, Péret, Chavée, Dumont, Embiríkos... and many others touched by an inexplicable grace)."

There is Mallarmé, then, and alongside him the aforementioned spiritual, mystical, and mythological traditions. "Should one be surprised," writes Claude Arlan, "that Jacques Lacomblez—atheist though he is—feels drawn to these thinkers of the ineffable, these wanderers on the edge of the abyss who are, for the most part, visionary poets? And that, on the path leading from medieval Shiite gnosis to the inspiring thought of André Breton, he enjoys

traveling in the company of Jakob Böhme, Novalis, Nerval, and other explorers of the Absolute?" Broadly speaking, this poetry constantly addresses the wholeness of reality and the human being—a wholeness lost in our rationalist civilization—and the dissolution of all the dualisms and dichotomies posited there as absolute, merging them into that totality invoked by Breton in the **Second Manifesto of Surrealism**: "Everything suggests that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imaginary, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions." Ultimately, Lacomblez's poetry also revolves around this point—sought by alchemists, mystics, Grail seekers, and Romantics alike—where the fragmented, torn human being becomes whole again—indeed, becomes sacred in a non-religious sense.

Love and eroticism—the union of man and woman—are central experiences of this merging of opposites, and thus they play a vital role in Lacomblez's poetry. Similarly, for him, music is a medium that allows those with ears to hear to experience a lost **plénitude**—a state in which the moment becomes eternity and the human being becomes whole again. Lacomblez's affinity for music also manifests itself in his verse, particularly in his more recent collections: **Pour une phrase voilée** (1997) contains not only numerous Wagner quotations but also musical structures such as the "Vier Wiener Lieder" (Four Viennese Songs), dedicated to figures including Franz Schreker and Gustav Mahler. **Le Voyageur immobile** (2001) also features "Zehn Lieder" (Ten Songs), and **Extrême du temps** (2007) includes a "Sinfonia da camera oscura" with movements titled Andante, Nocturne, Scherzo, Alla burlesca, and Lied.

With Lacomblez, however, the lyrical language is often far more ambiguous and difficult to access than many a musical composition. Moving far away from language that has become worn out—shrunk to a mere tool for simple communication—he handles it with immense freedom: breaking open its structures, disregarding grammatical rules, and employing wordplay and unprecedented word combinations. He opens language up to the unheard-of, to the unknown. (Any translator faces seemingly insoluble problems here.) In his more recent poetry collections, it seems, Lacomblez's poetic voice draws ever closer to falling silent—to a state of muteness. (Yet even in a volume like **Le Balcon sur le fleuve** [1975], only a few words occupy the large-format pages: "For a river-instant / death takes aim at itself"—a sentence spread across two pages, almost vanishing into the emptiness.) "This temptation to stop writing," observes Claude Arlan, "recurs in practically every one of [Lacomblez's] poetry collections (...). And yet, the poet always strives to add a few more words, as if to ward off that nothingness threatening to devour him." Words struggle to hold their ground against the encroaching void. Even the beloved becomes a shadow fading into the distance: "Your scattered body in the mirror of distances." A kind of end-time seems to have dawned: "It is late on all the clocks of the world," reads a line in **La Nuit défenestrée** (2009). "We are the lovers of twilight." **La Nuit défenestrée**—the night cast out the window—an act of violence akin to the famous Defenestration of Prague; Here, it is the night—that Novalis-esque dark womb of all things wondrous—that is flung out into the glaring daylight of so-called "reality," a reality that, for a poet like Lacomblez, is merely a lack of the real; for "I am one of those night-wanderers torn from their dreams into the dungeons of day who claim—without believing it—that the primeval forest still lies ahead of us." No, according to Lacomblez, what lies ahead is the opposite: emptiness, nothingness. And this nothingness spreads ever further: "The nothingness sovereignly ignores the scant little I add to it. Yet it stands ready to whisper my final word to me. A single word, unadorned and brief: IN VAIN."

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