

THE ELEGANCE
OF THE
HEDGEHOG

MURIEL BARBERY

*Translated from the French
by Alison Anderson*

GALLIC

This book is published with support from the French Ministry of
Culture/Centre national du Livre

A Gallic Book

First published in France as *L'élégance du hérisson* by Éditions Gallimard, Paris

Copyright © 2006 by Éditions Gallimard, Paris
English translation copyright © Europa Editions 2008

First published in Great Britain in 2008 by
Gallic Books, 134 Lots Road, London SW10 0RJ

This book is copyright under the Berne Convention
No reproduction without permission
All rights reserved

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-906040-18-5

Typeset in Simoncini Garamond and Arial by
SX Composing DTP, Rayleigh, Essex

Printed and bound by CPI Bookmarque, Croydon, CR0 4TD

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

MARX
(Preamble)

Elegance of the Hedgehog corr' edition 26/3/09 11:23 Page 12



1. Whosoever Sows Desire

‘**M**arx has completely changed the way I view the world,’ declared the Pallières boy this morning, although ordinarily he says nary a word to me.

Antoine Pallières, prosperous heir to an old industrial dynasty, is the son of one of my eight employers. There he stood, the most recent eruption of the ruling corporate elite – a class that reproduces itself solely by means of virtuous and proper hiccups – beaming at his discovery, sharing it with me without thinking or ever dreaming for a moment that I might actually understand what he was referring to. How could the labouring classes understand Marx? Reading Marx is an arduous task, his style is lofty, the prose is subtle and the thesis complex.

And that is when I very nearly – foolishly – gave myself away.

‘You ought to read *The German Ideology*,’ I told him. Little cretin in his conifer-green duffel coat.

To understand Marx and understand why he is mistaken, one must read *The German Ideology*. It is the anthropological cornerstone on which all his exhortations for a new world would be built, and on which a sovereign certainty is established: mankind, doomed to its own ruin through desire, would do better to stick to its own needs. In a world where the hubris of desire has been vanquished, a new social organisation can emerge, cleansed of struggle, oppression and deleterious hierarchies.

'Whosoever sows desire harvests oppression,' I nearly murmured, as if only my cat were listening to me.

But Antoine Pallières, whose repulsive and embryonic whiskers have nothing the least bit feline about them, is staring at me, uncertain of my strange words. As always, I am saved by the inability of living creatures to believe anything that might cause the walls of their little mental assumptions to crumble. Concierges do not read *The German Ideology*; hence, they would certainly be incapable of quoting the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach. Moreover, a concierge who reads Marx must be contemplating subversion, must have sold her soul to that devil, the trade union. That she might simply be reading Marx to elevate her mind is so incongruous a conceit that no member of the bourgeoisie could ever entertain it.

'Say hello to your mother,' I murmur as I close the door in his face, hoping that the complete dissonance between my two sentences will be veiled by the might of millennial prejudice.

2. The Miracles of Art

My name is Renée. I am fifty-four years old. For twenty-seven years I have been the concierge at number 7, Rue de Grenelle, a fine *hôtel particulier* with a courtyard and private gardens, divided into eight luxury apartments, all of which are inhabited, all of which are immense. I am a widow, I am short, ugly and plump, I have bunions on my feet and, if I am to credit certain early mornings of self-inflicted disgust, the breath of a mammoth. I did not go to university, I have always been poor, discreet and insignificant. I live alone with my cat, a big lazy tom who has no distinguishing features other than the fact that his paws smell bad when he is annoyed. Neither he nor I make any effort to take part in the social doings of our respective species. Because I am rarely friendly – though always polite – I am not liked, but am tolerated nonetheless: I correspond so very well to what social prejudice has collectively construed to be a typical French concierge that I am one of the multiple cogs that make the great universal illusion turn, the illusion according to which life has a meaning that can be easily deciphered. And since it has been written somewhere that concierges are old, ugly and sour, so has it been branded in fiery letters on the pediment of that same imbecilic firmament that the aforementioned concierges have rather large dithering cats who sleep all day on cushions covered with crocheted cases.

Similarly, it has been decreed that concierges watch television interminably while their rather large cats doze, and

that the entrance to the building must smell of pot-au-feu, cabbage soup or a country-style cassoulet. I have the extraordinary good fortune to be the concierge of a very high-class sort of building. It was so humiliating for me to have to cook such loathsome dishes that when Monsieur de Broglie – the State Councillor on the first floor – intervened (an intervention he described to his wife as being ‘courteous but firm’, whose only intention was to rid our communal habitat of such plebeian effluvia), it came as an immense relief, one I concealed as best I could beneath an expression of reluctant compliance.

That was twenty-seven years ago. Since then, I have gone every day to the butcher’s to buy a slice of ham or some calves’ liver, which I slip into my net bag between my packet of noodles and my bunch of carrots. I then obligingly flaunt these pauper’s victuals – now much improved by the noteworthy fact that they do not smell – because I am a pauper in a house full of rich people and this display nourishes both the consensual cliché and my cat Leo, who has become rather large by virtue of these meals that should have been mine, and who stuffs himself liberally and noisily with macaroni and butter, and pork from the delicatessen, while I am free – without any olfactory disturbances or anyone suspecting a thing – to indulge my own culinary proclivities.

Far more irksome was the issue of the television. In my late husband’s day, I did go along with it, for the constancy of his viewing spared me the chore of watching. From the hallway of the building you could hear the sound of the thing, and that sufficed to perpetuate the charade of social hierarchy, but once Lucien had passed away I had to think hard to find a way to keep up appearances. Alive, he freed me from this iniquitous obligation; dead, he has deprived me of his lack of culture, the indispensable bulwark against other people’s suspicions.

I found a solution thanks to a non-buzzer.

A chime linked to an infrared mechanism now alerts me to

the comings and goings in the hallway, which has eliminated the need for anyone to buzz to notify me of their presence if I happen to be out of earshot. For on such occasions I am actually in the back room, where I spend most of my hours of leisure and where, sheltered from the noise and smells that my condition imposes, I can live as I please, without being deprived of the information vital to any sentry: who is coming in, who is going out, with whom and at what time.

Thus, the residents going down the hall would hear the muffled sounds indicating a television was on, and as they tend to lack rather than abound in imagination, they would form a mental image of the concierge sprawled in front of her television set. As for me, cosily installed in my lair, I heard nothing but I knew that someone was going by. So I would go to the adjacent room and peek through the spy-hole located opposite the stairs and, well hidden behind the white net curtains, I could enquire discreetly as to the identity of the passer-by.

With the advent of videocassettes and, subsequently, the DVD divinity, things changed radically, much to the enrichment of my happy hours. As it is not terribly common to come across a concierge waxing ecstatic over *Death in Venice* or to hear strains of Mahler wafting from her lodge, I delved into my hard-earned conjugal savings and bought a second television set that I could operate in my hideaway. Thus, the television in the front room, guardian of my clandestine activities, could bleat away and I was no longer forced to listen to inane nonsense fit for the brain of a clam – I was in the back room, perfectly euphoric, my eyes filling with tears, in the miraculous presence of Art.