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To break “the Black Wall”. The motif of fear in plays by Henri-René Lenormand

*But in hospitals no sleep
on spring beds
and on soft pillows
for the sick.
They only shouted, called,
coughed and cursed:
“Where are the doctors?!
Where are the towels, spittoons,
tooth picks and attendants?!
We’re getting worse every minute!
And we don’t want to die,
but dress neatly,
tie green ties —
we don’t want bandages or cotton wool!
We protest!
And their calls become quieter,
until they died at night.*

K.I. Gálczyński

Introduction

When the First World War ended, in France there existed an atmosphere as if *belle époque* was going to reappear. An average French person was occupied with their fitness, fighting more or less successfully with the indications of their ageing; they

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took care of their finances; they visited boulevard theatres where they could relax after a hard day's work. Nonetheless, in that period of apparent happiness, there was a sharp increase in the number of patients visiting psychiatrists. Many argued, like Doctor Haeckel did¹, that the epoch would be recorded in history as a time of a pandemic of anxiety disorders. André Gide seemed to adore that uneasiness, while Anatol France considered those devoid of anxiety as being boring, irritating even.² There were many writers who in their plays raised the topic of the syndrome of depression³, which characterised an individual lost in the industrial dehumanised world. Jean Sarmant, Stève Passeur, and even Sacha Guitry – known for his comedy works – all created characters from the perspective of mental illnesses, depicting them as figures who ached. Henri-René Lenormand (1882–1951) was the most prolific playwright who raised the topic in France, which should not come as any surprise as throughout his life he carried existential unrest within him. It was him who – inspired by August Strindberg's theatre – studied the mysteries of the human soul. The mystery of internal life and attempts to penetrate it led many characters in his works to the edge of nervous breakdowns and, consequently, to committing suicide. Similarly to the author of *The Father*, the French playwright placed emphasis on the subjective and psychotic dimension of the presented world available to readers/viewers through the delusions of the distraught protagonists. The task of studying several plays by this once popular author seems interesting considering the in-depth psychological analysis of the characters that is typical of his works. He presented his characters as closed, isolated from the rest of the world, and suffocating in claustrophobic rooms under mansard roofs. Apart from physical walls, in Lenormand's works there is also the invisible to the eye yet pervading “black wall”, in front of which a human being stands completely defenceless and mentally broken, trying to find in it even the slightest crack that would enable them to escape the delusional world.

Time Is a Dream

Le Temps est un songe [*Time Is a Dream*] (1919) is probably Lenormand's first text in which he described depression from which the protagonist suffered. The play's protagonist is Nico van Eyden, who returns to Utrecht after spending many years in Java to meet with his sister (Riemke) and his former sweetheart (Romée). The play begins with a situation in which the latter one has a vision while strolling past a pond: she sees the head of the protagonist who is drowning in the water. Yet in the

1 J.-P. Bichet, *Étude sur l'anxiété*, Amédée Legrand, 1929, p. 18. [Unless indicated otherwise, quotations in English were translated from Polish.]

2 Ibid., p. 19.

3 Daniel-Rops, *Notre inquiétude. Essais: louange de l'inquiétude – sur une génération nouvelle – positions devant l'inquiétude*, Perrin & Cie, Paris 1927.

next scene, the man is completely fine and debates joyfully with other inhabitants of a house enveloped in a thick and menacing fog. Romée confesses to Riemke about her, she assumes, delusion. From that moment on, both women torture themselves, wondering whether one of them saw in that chocking scene a future to come. The whole story does actually lead to the suicide of the protagonist. Lenormand intentionally began his play from the end, though his purpose was not guided by purely formal pursuits. He presented a character who could not find his place in a civilisation cherishing intelligence and "mathematical logic" – hence the loose structure of the play, which consisted of images in a not necessarily chronological order. Thus, the playwright created oneiric poetics, so typical for his later plays.

The Western world is symbolised in the play by all the laws which blur and distort reality with their deceptive logic, while the distant Java constitutes a reference to the Orient, which rejects mental speculation, thus incarnating intuition and unbridled vital power. Nico felt happy on the island, because he was free there from the omnipotent rationalism (constant dwelling on things and tiring musings); he was able to live life to the fullest, but as soon as he steps into the territory of the European civilisation, he immediately feels threatened and uneasy. He then starts to ponder, delving deep into his nature while realising that the words which he uses mean nothing and yet they cause human anguish. While being away from the big world, he was not occupied by the passage of time, but in Europe he starts obsessing about it: "Yesterday, today, tomorrow... those are just words... words which exist only in our narrow brains, outside them there is no past or future... there is only the endless present."⁴ Nico suffers, because his rational nature has awoken (which he hates dearly) and it cannot peer through the mystery of humanity or the surrounding world; actually, everything becomes, as Strindberg would say, an illusion, a nightmare⁵: "We can never know that which our eyes see, which our ears hear, which passes through our brains... Everything is a spectre and reflections of spectres."⁶

When being cut off from the reality, the protagonist faces the mysterious "black wall", also represented in art as a thickening fog which closes his path to the world. On that distant island, he experienced a non-verbalised symbiosis with nature (he did not feel the need to understand his bliss), while in his home city, Utrecht, he feels alien (he cannot move freely and everything is a mystery to him), as if torn away from the world. He experiences the painful separation from his surroundings, yet the more he thinks about it, the more the chasm between him and his surroundings grows. He becomes, in a sense, a prisoner of his own mind.

4 H.-R. Lenormand, *Le Temps est un songe*, Théâtre Complet 8, Albin Michel, 1935, p. 213.

5 A. Strindberg, *Ur Ockulta Dagboken*, Stockholm, Bonnier, 1963, p. 59; cf. G. Vogelweith, *Le personnage et ses métamorphoses dans le théâtre de Strindberg*, thèse, Université de Paris IV, 1971, p. 570.

6 H.-R. Lenormand, *Le Temps...*, p. 214.

A Mediaeval man. Just as the people who define some religious systems, he, too, lives as if on three levels: Earth's, Heaven's, and Hell's. Psychoanalysts enclosed that three-dimensional world within the limits of human psyche. Thus, they isolated it from the rest of the world. Humans have been locked inside themselves against the universal natural principle of connection between the life's system with the environment. *Id* became hell, *super ego* became heaven, and *ego* became earth.⁷

Though Nico debates much in the play with the other characters, those instances are seemingly dialogues as the protagonist talks, de facto, with himself; only he exists and the other characters are as if chips off of his tormented soul; the protagonist actually concludes when talking to Romée: "We do not exist... you are, I am... I am alone."⁸ He repeats that in a conversation with Ms Beunke, too: "I know, of course, that even though you are here, you don't really exist."⁹ He is the enemy of rationalism. He rejects the whole Western heritage. He knows far too well that everything is an illusion, and yet he stubbornly debates the ontological issues which pester his mind. He lives in his constantly shrinking and limited world, losing his personality more and more. Therefore, one perceives the presented reality through the eyes of a human being suffering from depression. This world is deformed and closed, and the protagonist suffocates in that atmosphere of the North, which is ruthlessly invaded by the fog. When discussing Lenormand's play, Paul Surer aptly noted that "man pestered by fate is witness to the gradual disintegration of his personality and will (...) seeing death as the only cure for his torment."¹⁰

The Failures

Le Ratés [*The Failures*] is one of the most autobiographical of Lenormand's plays. He started writing it already in 1910, yet it took him a decade to complete it, as if he needed time and courage to present on stage his relationship with Maria Kalff (1874–1959), a Dutch actress. His intention was not, however, to accurately reproduce the tough moments they experienced together, but, rather, he used those events as a pretext to recall a period of a painful mental and creative crisis which befell him in his tumultuous life. The play's protagonists are nameless: He, a mediocre writer with great ambitions, and She, an actress who every now and then plays in second-rate theatres. They both set off on a *tour*, which from the very start proves a true ordeal. The woman does not receive any leading roles despite having

7 A. Kępiński, *Lęk*, Państwowy Zakład Wydawnictw Lekarskich, Warsaw 1977, p. 52.

8 H.-R. Lenormand, *Le Temps...*, p. 199.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 233.

10 P. Surer, *Współczesny teatr francuski*, trans. K.A. Jeżewski, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warsaw 1977, p. 94.

forever dreamt of a major career; the man accompanies her with the belief that through that journey he will find an artistic spark which will enable him to finally bounce off of the bottom of misery. However, neither of the dreams becomes fulfilled; on the contrary, the protagonists sink deeper into their tragic fate. In this station drama, the audience takes part in a slow yet inevitable moral and physical downfall of two wretches who *cum grano salis* foreshadow Samuel Beckett's tramps. They could have been saved from the impending catastrophe by true love which still existed between them, yet their financial problems forced them to have the woman acquire money by resorting to prostitution. The man even encourages her to do that, even though he cannot stand the thought that his beloved could fall into the arms of another man. Filled with jealousy and despair, the failed writer kills his lover and then takes his own life. Their *tour* ends and the curtain drops.

In trying to offer a moving image of humanity "without properties", to paraphrase Robert Musil, Lenormand quite deliberately placed his protagonists in a "Maeterlinckian termite nest", dark and dirty, where the insects inhabiting it moved like "in a cell or a grave."¹¹ The protagonists move from one place to another, like insects, without a destination. Their route resembles a true *via crucis*, marked with stations, at which they nest in repulsive rooms under mansard roofs. What is striking is the limited space of places where poor people live, as if they were trapped in some dark dungeons. Lenormand did not wish to only emphasise their damaged social status as the places, which he accurately referenced, are also supposed to reflect their depressive state of mind. Even though they seem to be soulless puppets controlled by some rampant and mindless force, "humanity's trash", as they might have termed themselves (they define themselves even worse in the play), they ponder and they sense their existence painfully. During a rest before continuing, they endlessly debate the point of their journey which is a symbol of their hopeless life. They obsess about their fate – and, in time, it starts to resemble "prattling" – as if words themselves were supposed to fill the void of their hard life. The man seems to realise that their situation has no good solution when he concludes in an emotional tone: "We are not achieving anything... We are not getting anywhere! The earth rotates and it knows nothing about people! No one knows that we're here! So why would you want to become someone?"¹² And yet they press on as if still hoping that they will manage in some miraculous way to break the "black wall" of bitterness. Yet it is difficult to escape a psychotic space while fighting the relentlessly progressing decrease of life's dynamics. Thus, the protagonists, instead of supporting each other's spirits in their misery, maltreat each other even more, as if psychopathically trying to find pleasure in tormenting one another. The woman actually says: "Maybe happiness is born out of suffering."¹³

11 M. Maeterlinck, *La vie des termites*, Charpentier/Fasquelle, 1926, p. 226.

12 H.-R. Lenormand, *Les Ratés*, Théâtre Complet 1, Édition Albin Michel, 1921, p. 125.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

Lenormand created characters immersed deep in sorrow. In doing so, he tried to present a world depicted through the eyes of those who are hurting (the task was easier as he was able to pour into the pages of the play his own melancholic states), which is why he made sure he created a claustrophobic atmosphere, in which its “human scraps” nested like in a mound. The inability to unload own “creative tendencies” often leads, according to specialists in the “illnesses of the soul”, not only to frustration, but also to a neurotic drop in one’s mood, since “in a depressed mood space becomes closed. Any plan for activity encounters resistance, fulfilment seems unattainable, and even minor issues grow to become major problems. In depression, a person has the impression of being at the bottom of a deep well surrounded by steep walls and not being able to escape.”¹⁴ Those “steep walls” continue to narrow down the living space of the protagonists, driving them to the edge of a complete nervous breakdown and to death rupturing the painful course of suffering.

The staging of the play by Georges Pitoëff Kamerny in Geneva at the Théâtre des Arts (1920) was quite a treat for the director. He discovered the play’s deep meaning and through staging techniques he presented that which could not have been expressed directly in dialogue, because, as he argued, “the main task of a director is to bring forward a play, and in it a thought, an idea, that which is not expressed or not expressible through words.”¹⁵ Therefore, the Russian director extracted the main idea – a *Grundmotiv*, as a German would say – by bringing forward in his made-up dispositive construct an atmosphere of tight and closed spaces. Thus, according to him, one can best reproduce on stage the psychotic world in which the protagonists trudged through subterranean labyrinths towards an inevitable catastrophe. His two-level structure (he applied a similar one nine years later when staging Ferdinand Bruckner’s *Criminals*) not only enabled actors to perform simultaneously, but it also defined clear borders between the so-called normal (real) world and the internal (psychotic) world, with the latter one constantly shrinking in stinking and tiny spaces as the melancholy of the protagonists grew. Actors had to learn how to perform on a small surface and, similarly to ‘naturalists’, they had to experience on their own how the walls which limited their movements also determined the psychology of the protagonists tormented by their suffering. In that limited space, they excellently played the tragic condition of Lenormand’s protagonists. In fact, the playwright thanked the director for presenting on stage the “existential terror”¹⁶ hiding in the dialogues.

¹⁴ A. Kępiński, *Melancholia*, Państwowy Zakład Wydawnictw Lekarskich, Warsaw 1974, p. 50.

¹⁵ K. Braun, *Wielka Reforma Teatru w Europie, ludzie-idee-zdarzenia*, Wydawnictwo: Zakład Narodowy Imienia Ossolińskich, 1984, p. 158.

¹⁶ H.-R. Lenormand, *Les Pitoëff, souvenirs*, Odette Lieutier, 1943, p. 48.

Coward

Many years later, the French playwright returned to his past fears, which most certainly had never stopped pestering him. In 1926, he published *Le Lâche*, intending to reckon with his past. The topic of the place referred to the time of the First World War when Lenormand, afraid that he might be sent to the front, simulated tuberculosis and found refuge in a sanatorium in neutral Switzerland. As Lenormand admitted, he felt alienated in the cosmopolitan world filled with the "terribly sick", who received treatments in Davos. He not only felt alien, but he was also torn by remorse that he was benefiting from peace while his homeland was fighting with its eternal enemy.¹⁷ When writing his play, he did not expect absolution; he only wished to present a moving stage of a melancholic, whom he was. The play presents a young painter who, similarly to the author, seeks refuge in the Swiss Alps from the Great War raging in the old continent. He arrives at the spa as a patient and from his very first replies one can sense his fear that someone might realise that he is faking. He is afraid of death, yet he does not seem a common coward¹⁸ as he suffers from a neurosis which keeps reminding him about the passage of time, and he wishes to devote the time he has left to his art.¹⁹ In the following scenes (images), readers/viewers follow a slow deterioration of the protagonist's mental state as he shuts himself inside his world, from which it is difficult to escape. It was not only due to factual reasons that Lenormand located the play in a remote place surrounded by mountains; they were also supposed to symbolise walls behind which seemingly normal life goes on. With his nerves in tatters, Jacques senses danger everywhere. It seems to him that the people he meets are constantly alluding to his cowardice. He himself feels alone and defenceless; in this context, mountain tops do not appear to be geographical decorations, but they reflect the protagonist's internal experiences. He feels like in a prison, unable to escape, and all the characters staying at the health centre seem to him to be like some soulless mummies moving their lips and smiling suspiciously. The young painter's world compresses. It is no longer the mountains that push him away from liberation, but, rather, the unreal surroundings becomes a ghastly and never-ending nightmare. The more Jacques tries to escape the very thought of death, the more he is reminded by everyone around him about it. The patients obsessively talk about death lurking around the corner; all guests are, in fact, depicted if not as "living corpses" then at least as convicts awaiting the moment when they will draw their final breath. After some girl dies, one character concludes in the protagonist's presence: "The light scent of corpse has been emanating from her for the past few months already. The flowers brought into the room did not help.

17 Ibid., p. 287.

18 P. Surer, "Études sur le théâtre français: Henri-René Lenormand", *Information littéraire*, September–October 1953, p. 135.

19 G. Royde-Smith, "The Coward", Londres, *The Outlook*, vol. 58, 31 July 1926, p. 107.

After fifteen minutes you could already smell the peculiar scent.”²⁰ He considers every word as a direct threat to his life. Yet his caution does not protect him against co-operating with a German spy; he would do anything to be left alone. Fearing death, he eventually understands that, paradoxically, it is only death that can be his true salvation. His fear was associated with his wait, yet when the final hour comes, the anxiety disappears as if without any tangible reason. What comes is peace and a sense of relief that the nightmare of living in fear is finally over.

Certainly, one could conclude that Jacques is a clinical case of a paranoid (delusional) person as in his world people stop being people and their only intention is to destroy the one who suffers. Similarly to the previously mentioned works, this whole play unfolds inside the protagonist. This is because the readers/audience perceive the people whom the protagonist meets on his way through his tormented soul. They are, therefore, deformed, and they are constantly plotting against him. In order to avoid being uncovered, Jacques wears a mask and he has to conceal his true feelings. He cannot allow others to notice that he is afraid of the patients, so he plays the role of a bed-ridden patient. Even though he fits well in his role, the fear he feels never leaves him. Surely, just as he wears a mask, others also protect their secrets behind the pretences of some mortal maladies from which they allegedly suffer. “The mask is often the source of fear of people, we fear people in masks as we cannot know what might be hiding underneath, we do not trust such people (...) it seems to us that under a mask there lurks a hostile attitude.”²¹ This is why Jacques shuts himself in his made-up world, not allowing his surroundings to come close, and he separates himself from everyone with an invisible wall which does not, however, give him the peace he desires. From the point of view of psychiatry, he appears to be a psychasthenic and paranoid individual. This psychopathic condition was best described by Antoni Kępiński:

Fear causes the intensification of an egocentric structure of the world. Under the influence of fear people feel alone facing the surrounding world; everything around them leads to destruction and annihilation. The world to them is hostile, not benevolent. And they feel like a hunted animal and traps await them at every corner. They cannot come close to anyone as they do not know whether a specific person will not prove their enemy. People around them keep thinking how to harass and destroy them; thus, they become the central figure of the world. Fear reduces the perspective of our vision of the surrounding world. Normally it forms a complex network of relations with the environment – some people are closer, other more distant; some are friendly, other neutral or hostile. In fear, the surrounding world presses on us, it wants to destroy us, there is only the Self and the world hostile to me.²²

²⁰ H.-R. Lemormand, “Le Lâche”, *La Petite Illustration*, 13 February 1926, p. 4.

²¹ A. Kępiński, *Psychopatie*, Sagittarius, 1992, p. 126.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 126–127.

The alienation of the protagonist from the "objective reality" was also reproduced in the play's staging by Georges Pitoëff, which was held on 1st December, 1925, in Théâtre des Arts. The scenery resembled "cubist pictorial", because the Russian director, actually following the directions of the playwright himself, filled the scene with geometric figures: rectangles, circles, ellipses, and, mostly, triangles. Those "spiritual triangles"²³, clearly referring to Kandinsky's theory, were supposed to emphasise the world of the suffering protagonist who separates himself from the hostile external world following the expressionist style.²⁴ The entire dispositive scenery reflected the claustrophobic atmosphere. Lenormand himself stressed in the stage directions that room interiors should be devoid of any windows.²⁵ That was the scenery of a scene which was dominated by two triangles which created Jacques' unreal world. The contrast between the whiteness of the mountains and the darkness of the interior occupied by the artist emphasised even more the dissonance between the man's obsession and the real world located on the other invisible side of the mountain ranges. The trapezoids and circles produced a sense of isolation from the world of the living. Probably the most striking of the scenes developed by Pitoëff for Lenormand's play was the ball from the seventh image, in which the persons dancing tango resembled terrible spectres²⁶; the entire scene expressed the nightmarish experiences of the protagonist, who is not able to wake up from his bad dream. Only death could bring an end to the suffering.

Conclusion

In the imagination of ancient Greeks, Pegasus, the winged horse, was supposed to be born from the blood of the youngest of the three Gorgons, the one which symbolised fear. That beautiful metaphor represented people's vision of poetry and the suffering through which it is born. Creative work was similarly viewed by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who considered dread as the best part of the humanity. Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz followed a similar line of thinking; he argued that "there is no art without the fear of life or fear of death."²⁷ Undoubtedly, all of Lenormand's personal fears also were the reason why he undertook a writing career, writing plays in particular. It was for him not only a means of literary expression but also a form of therapy, which was, in fact, noted by various critics. The theatre of the

23 W. Kandyński, *O duchowości w sztuce*, trans. S. Fijałkowski, Państwowa Galeria Sztuki w Łodzi, 1996, pp. 37–41.

24 J. de Jomaron, "Henri-René Lenormand mis en scène par Georges Pitoëff", [in:] *Les Voies de la création théâtrale*, tome VII, Éditions du C.N.R.S., 1979, p. 329.

25 H.-R. Lenormand, *Le Lâche*, p. 17.

26 H.-R. Lenormand, *Les Pitoëff...*, pp. 128–129.

27 J. Mitarski, "Demonologia lęku. Niektóre formy ekspresji i symboliki lęku w dziejach kultury", [in:] A. Kępiński, *Lęk*, pp. 353–360.

author of *Les Mangeurs de Rêves* was considered “morbid, associated not so much with psychology as with psychiatry.”²⁸ In the discussed works, the French playwright diagnosed cases of melancholia and, despite seemingly retaining objectivity in the manner of presenting reality, he described a psychotic world perceived through the eyes of his suffering characters. Thus, he put emphasis on the release of internal subconscious obsessions which lead to deformations of the external reality. A common fog or mountain tops become unrealistic, because to the sick protagonist they seem as the borders of his distorted world. The same process of making them unrealistic applies to the narrow rooms under mansard roofs, where posers are cooped up; they become walls which limit them not only in physical terms, but also enclose them in their own delusions. All the characters feel the sultriness and strangeness of the world, and, thus, having reached the edge of despair, they hit an invisible “black wall” of depression, which they cannot break. When describing the suffering of the ‘modern human being’, Lenormand expressed his pessimism, placing his characters in situations without a way out. Any attempt at escaping was doomed to fail, and their only form of liberation was to commit suicide.

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²⁸ P. Surer, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

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Tomasz Kaczmarek

Przebić „czarną ścianę”, czyli motyw lęku w dramatach Henri-René Lenormanda

Streszczenie

Henri-René Lenormand odnowił teatr wyznaczając mu jako domenę tajemnicy duszy ludzkiej. We wszystkich swych sztukach dążył do wyjaśnienia tajemnicy życia wewnętrznego, do rozwikłania zagadki, jaką jest człowiek dla samego siebie. Dramaturgia była więc dla autora Wariatki z niebios nie tylko środkiem ekspresji literackiej, ale i swego rodzaju terapią, pozwalającą mu zwalczyć depresję. W niniejszym artykule przywołano trzy dramaty: *Czas jest snem*, *Wykolejeńcy*, *Tchórz*, w których Francuz diagnozuje przypadki melancholii, opisując świat psychotyczny z perspektywy cierpiących postaci. Ukazuje on swoich bohaterów w zamknięciu, odizolowanych od reszty świata, duszących się w klaustrofobicznych mansardach, które symbolizują ich nadwerżony stan psychiczny. Poza tymi ścianami fizycznymi istnieje też w utworach Lenormanda niewidzialna dla oka, choć wszechobecna „czarna ściana”, przed którą staje zupełnie bezbronny, załamany psychicznie człowiek, szukający w niej chociażby najmniejszej szczeliny umożliwiającej mu wydostanie się na zewnątrz z urojonego świata.

Słowa kluczowe: „czarna ściana”, depresja, niepokój, lęk, dramat, Henri-René Lenormand

To break “the Black Wall”. The motif of fear in plays by Henri-René Lenormand

Summary

Henri-René Lenormand refreshed theatre, defining a new domain for it: the mysteries of the human soul. In all of his plays, he strived to explain the secret of internal life, as well as to solve the mystery that people are to themselves. Therefore, dramaturgy was for the author of *La Folle du Ciel* not only a means of literary expression, but also a kind of therapy, enabling him to combat his depression. In this article, three plays are discussed: *Le Temps est un songe*, *Les Ratés*, and *Le Lâche*, in which the French playwright diagnosed cases of melancholia by describing the psychotic world from the perspectives of the suffering protagonists. He presented them in closure, isolated from the rest of the world, suffocating in claustrophobic rooms under mansard roofs which symbolised their strained mental conditions. Apart from physical walls, in Lenormand’s works there is also the invisible to the eye yet pervasive “black wall”, in front of which a human being stands completely defenceless and mentally broken, trying to find in it even the slightest crack enabling them to escape the delusional world.

Keywords: “black wall”, depression, anxiety, fear, play, Henri-René Lenormand

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