

Two Biographers of François Mitterrand: Pierre Péan and Jean Lacouture

by Pr Joanny Moulin, Membre senior de l'Institut Universitaire de France

President François Mitterrand was a complex and controversial figure, from a historical as well as from a political and psychological point of view, and his is a typical and spectacular case of biography intervening in the public political debate, not directly, but by impacting historiography in the making. It may be interesting to propose a study in comparative biography, not in the sense of comparing two presidents à la Plutarch, in the style of *Parallel Lives*, or à la Suetonius, in imitation of the *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, but in the sense of comparing the works of two or more biographers on the same subject, as in comparative literature we compare the works of other authors. Such a proposal contains an implicit methodological take: that biography is, if not perhaps unquestionably a literary genre, at least a form of 'literature' (with a small 'l'), and undeniably a mode of writing; and biographers, whether they are journalists, historians, academics from various disciplines, are writers: they are men and women of letters – *gens de lettres* – , and as such it is their role and legitimate ambition to enter public debates and exert an influence of their own on public opinion.

Among the numerous biographies of François Mitterrand, it is particularly rewarding to focus on two of his best-known biographers: Pierre Péan, for his 1994 biography *Une jeunesse française: François Mitterrand 1934–1947*, and Jean Lacouture, for his *Mitterrand. Une Histoire de Français*, of which the two volumes were published together in 1998. The dates are significant, at least for readers familiar with French political life, bearing in mind that François Mitterrand, the 21st President of the French Republic (4th President of the Fifth Republic), was in office for two seven-year mandates, from 1981 to 1988, and from 1988 to 1995. The post-presidency was very short, since François Mitterrand died in January 1996, some six months after the end of his second term in office, at the age of 79 (he was born in October 1916). Pierre Péan's biography came out while President Mitterrand was still in office, whereas Jean Lacouture withheld publication of his biography to publish the two volumes together, two years after his subject's death.

Both Péan and Lacouture were journalists, both had the opportunity to interview François Mitterrand, although neither the one nor the other was what we call an 'authorized' biographer: they both declared that Mitterrand had exercised no veto on their writing, and in many instances they demonstrated that he had expressed opinions that were hard to reconcile with the truth. In the latter case, amply illustrated in both these biographies, a 'space of possibles' opens up, that is the space biography explores, especially biographies of relatively recent presidents that have to grapple with the political discourses, propaganda, and mythologies that are still very much alive, and as yet undeconstructed.

Both Péan and Lacouture declare a degree of sympathy with, and perhaps of partiality for President Mitterrand, probably for different reasons. Péan said he voted for Mitterrand, but that he was neither a staunch supporter, nor a detractor like those who eventually turned against their former idol: *'Je ne suis pas un "déçu du socialisme", puisque je ne suis pas socialiste'* (9). As for Lacouture, he was very much posing as an *'homme de gauche'*, making much of having gravitated in one of the many *'cercles'* of friends and acquaintances, which

Mitterrand cultivated to the point of making it both his trademark and his political method of power-building.

Whereas Péan wrote a biography that is a brilliant example of investigative journalism, Lacouture is quietly contributing to the construction of the mythic figure of François Mitterrand. Having followed the president for years, although at a greater distance than James Boswell did Samuel Johnson, he produced a monumental, 'cradle-to-grave', 'warts-and-all' portrait. For certainly he does not fight shy of depicting the defects of the character, but in the last resort his readers are left with the very strong feeling that, on the whole, these defects – which he had rather call 'ambiguities' – are dwelt upon with a view to producing a 'reality effect', bringing in an added veracity value to a portrayal that, when all is told, is hagiographic. Mitterrand is clearly one of Lacouture's heroes, and this biography comes at the end of a series of presidential biographies: *Ho Chi Minh* (1967), *Nasser* (1971), and on the French presidents *Léon Blum* (1977), *Pierre Mendès France* (1981), *de Gaulle* in three volumes (1984 to 1986), and *Mitterrand* (1998). De Gaulle is the odd one out in this sequence of socialist leaders, but the founder of the Fifth Republic is the heroic presidential figure par excellence, even and perhaps especially for someone like Mitterrand, who would later incriminate him so drastically in *Le coup d'État permanent* (1964), and who defines himself as de Gaulle's radical antagonist. One of Lacouture's most conspicuous theses is that this apparent rivalry is in fact the mask of an Oedipal relationship: a narrative strategy that consists in using the validating authority of the Freudian myth to present Mitterrand as the 'self-proclaimed "gentle dauphin"' (I, 110), that is to say the symbolic heir of the General, if not his political and spiritual heir. That is far-fetched, to say the least. In moments like this, Lacouture waxes lyrical, and empathizes with his subject to the point of putting imaginary speeches in his mouth.

This kind of empathizing – which is probably one of his capital stylistic sins – is very much Lacouture's signature as a biographer, who does not try to disguise his partiality to his subject, thus giving the impression that he is a fan biographer writing primarily for fan readers. To this must be added a strong redolence of gossip, as Lacouture uses, and abuses, lengthy, anecdotal quotations from testimonies by political celebrities. That is apparently the major reason why volume 2, devoted to the 14 years in office and the six-month post-presidency, is some two hundred pages longer than Volume 1, covering the 61 years of Mitterrand before he finally became President.

On the contrary, Pierre Péan's *Une jeunesse française: François Mitterrand 1934–1947* is a *partial* biography in the sense that it deals only with some thirteen years in the life of Mitterrand, long before he became President of the Republic. It is not partial in that sense that Lacouture's biography is: on the contrary, Péan takes the stance of the impartial journalist enquiring to discover the truth, even though at the same time he is manifestly out to write a bestseller. Two photographs on the cover show a very recognizable young François Mitterrand in conversation with Marshal Philippe Pétain in 1942, and disguised with a fake moustache as Morland – one of the several war names under which he was known in the Résistance. Except perhaps on one or two important points, Péan's biography was disclosing no new piece of information. More exactly, it was bringing back into the limelight aspects of the historical character of François Mitterrand that the political figure of the socialist President had done its best to attenuate. The picture of Mitterrand with Pétain, and his sleuth-like mug shot with the postiche moustache produced a scandal-press effect, which did much

for the popular success of a book that forced President Mitterrand to explain himself publicly on his activities under the Nazi-aligned Vichy regime, a commitment so far from marginal that he was awarded the Order of the Gallic Francisque.

The dates of the chosen period are significant too: 1934 is the year when young François Mitterrand arrived in Paris, at the age of 18, to study law and political science, a few months after the 6 February 1934 crisis, when far-right leagues attempted to seize the National Assembly. The young bourgeois Catholic from Jarnac, a small provincial town in the South-West of France, was a member of the *Volontaires Nationaux*, the organisation of Colonel François de la Roque, the leader of the right-wing league of the *Croix de Feu*, in fact the most moderate of the leagues, who turned out to have contributed to the failure of the February 1934 coup. However, one year later, in February 1935, young François Mitterrand, still an active militant of the National Volunteers, and already a charismatic students' leader, was photographed in a demonstration 'against the metic invasion' – '*contre l'invasion métèque*' ... At the other end of the period selected by Pierre Péan, 1947 is the year when François Mitterrand, at the age of 31, became Minister of Veterans and War Victims in Robert Schuman's cabinet under socialist President Vincent Auriol (leader of the SFIO – French Section of the Workers' International). How the young 1934 Croix de Feu agitator with strong ideological sympathies for the far-right metamorphosed himself into a minister in a socialist government, who would later become the figurehead of socialism *à la française*: such is the mystery that Pierre Péan attempts to unravel in his partial biography. Yet Péan leaves his readers with the enigma of a profound ambiguity of the iconic socialist president at the end of his second mandate

By focussing on these problematic years in the life of Mitterrand, Péan paradoxically challenged the myth of Mitterrand and confirmed it at the same time. In these now remote and generally forgotten chapters of his personal history, he had played a role that was, on the one hand, apparently poles apart from that of his presidential destiny, yet, on the other hand, so consistent with the darker, manoeuvring side of a man who had then come to be called '*le Florentin*', in reference to Machiavel, for his boundless political cunning. The strong effect produced by Péan's biography rested on this powerful contrast, yet the biographer did his job with professional seriousness, investigating the facts in considerable depth, and seemed to leave the readers to judge for themselves in the end. Péan roughly follows the chronological order, while interrupting his narrative on five occasions with a series of recurring chapters entitled '*Bagages*' – meaning something like 'Impedimenta' – where he goes to great lengths to describe his family relationships with right-wing milieus and personalities, that is part of what the biographer calls Mitterrand's 'ideological luggage' – his '*barda idéologique*' (479). In these 'Bagages' or 'Impedimenta' the readers learn, for instance, that François's brother, Robert Mitterrand, was the brother-in-law of Eugène Deloncle, who in 1935 founded the fascist-leaning, anti-communist *Comité secret d'action révolutionnaire*, commonly known as *La Cagoule*.

François Mitterrand had been a prisoner in Germany from June 1940 till December 1941, when after two failed attempts he finally escaped from Stalag 9A. He then joined the Vichy government, and, with the help of his family connections according to Péan, became a middle-rank civil servant taking care of the returning French POWs, which were potentially a fighting force for the resistance of the interior. François Mitterrand's brave commitment in the Résistance is beyond doubt. What remains problematic for many is that he should have chosen

to do so from within the Vichy Establishment, instead of joining the Free French in London or Algiers. That was conveniently explained out by a rumour, extent during World War II in occupied France, but which never held water, according to which Pétain and de Gaulle were conniving with one another in one and the same ruse, de Gaulle organizing the military action while Pétain was only pretending to play Hitler's game to alleviate the sufferings of the French people – the so-called theory of the shield and the sword (*'l'épée et le bouclier'*).

With the *deficit* of hindsight, as a 'Vichy resistant' Mitterrand was bound to give the impression that he was biding his time while remaining in a winner-winner position whatever the issue of the war. Besides, he made dubious friends in Vichy, and he would later be blamed for remaining faithful to them to the end. Chief among these, collaborationist René Bousquet, who was sentenced to five years of *indignité nationale* after the war, then saw his sentence reduced for having also aided the resistance, went into business, returned to politics in the 1970s, and was among President Mitterrand's '*visiteurs du soir*' and close relations for years after his election in 1981, until in 1989 he was accused of crimes against humanity, indicted by the French Ministry of Justice in 1991 for his responsibility in the 1942 Vel d'Hiv Roundup, which was the prelude to thousands of Jewish men, women, and children being sent to extermination in death camps. Bousquet never went to trial, for he was shot dead in his Paris flat in 1993. 'I saw him with pleasure,' said President Mitterrand to Pierre Péan. 'He had nothing to do with what people say about him.' The ultimate truth about René Bousquet and François Mitterrand's relationship with him is still open to question. To Pierre Péan goes the merit of having honestly documented this aspect, among many others, of Mitterrand's action in Vichy.

Compared to Lacouture's biography, Péan's has the reverse effect of positioning Mitterrand on the side of Vichy and therefore against de Gaulle from the start. Lacouture claims that Mitterrand had 'missed' de Gaulle because as he was a prisoner he had not received the mystical shock of the Appeal of 18 June 1940. Not so Péan, who represents Mitterrand as a radical opponent. Mitterrand happened a rival of Michel Caillau, the General's nephew, for the organization of a network of the returning POWs in occupied France. When Mitterrand made the move to fly to London, and from thence to Algiers where he also met General de Gaulle in December 1943, Péan argues that it was to meet General Giraud, who was President Roosevelt's choice against de Gaulle, in the vain hope of reconciling the Resistance and the Free French with Vichy. Mitterrand, aka Morand, aka Monier, rightly considered as a *Giraudiste*, was detained much longer than necessary by the *Gaullists* in Algiers, then in London, and in both cases he finally broke free with the help of Giraud's networks.

Although on the whole Péan's biography is certainly much more impartial than Lacouture's, it is probable that the latter carries the greatest authority in the end, although Lacouture never really contradicts Péan's, but on the contrary he has only compliments for the seriousness and accuracy of his work. Hypothetically, that is because Lacouture's is a biography 'from the cradle to the grave', relating the whole life, instead of just an aspect of his personality or a short period of his life. Although the readers do sense that Lacouture is partial to his subject – and indeed most of them probably like his biography better *because of this*. The Vichy youth years become only a detail: it is conceded that they are a mistake, it is a 'wart' that only makes the hero more human, and reinforces the readers' sympathy. On the whole, it is in fact a denial, or a quiet refutation, of what Péan had begun to demonstrate: that Mitterrand's Vichy years, far from being a youthful error, may very well give the key to his dissimulative

personality, and that in fact there may be *no solution of continuity* between the Mitterrand of the 1940s and the Mitterrand of the 1980s.

The same can be said of at least two other problematic aspects of President Mitterrand's life: (1) his bigamy, or the fact that he had a secret double life wife Madame Anne Pingeot, with whom he had a daughter, Mazarine Pingeot, and (2) his cancer, or the fact that he learned he had prostate cancer with bone metastases only a few months after his first presidential election in 1981, and that his doctors gave him only two or three years to live, predicting to him that he would not live to the end of his term in office. So that throughout his fourteen years in office the President was a doomed man, living in severe physical pain regularly alleviated by injections of morphine, who was also accommodating his second family in a Paris building belonging to the State in Quai Branly, then in a residence of the French Republic in Souzy-la-Briche, under the supervision of special policemen whose job it was to guard the two women as well as the secret of their existence.

Lacouture chooses to reveal these two facts at the same time, in the middle of the second volume, under the pretext that Anne Pingeot was the only one to know about the cancer. The story has then reached 1986, the year of the socialists defeat in the legislative elections that brought about the first 'cohabitation': the inauguration of political configuration where a right-wing prime minister acts under a left-wing president. Why 1986? There is no logical reason. The President's fatal cancer became public knowledge only in 1992, the existence of Mazarine Pingeot in 1994. François Mitterrand's affair with Anne Pingeot began in 1965, the year of his first presidential campaign when he ran against de Gaulle and imposed himself as the most promising left-wing leader, and Mazarine was born in 1974, another presidential election year, when Mitterrand ran and lost against Giscard d'Estaing. The biographer's empathy with the character, which is supposed to be Lacouture's trademark, demanded that these facts be narrated at the moment when they happened in the life of the hero; then the narrative of his life would have been very different: the readers would thus have been placed in a position to infer what the mental states of the President may have been like. Instead of that, Lacouture writes the history of Mitterrand's life from the outside, as it *appeared* to be, year in, year out, to observers to whom large parts of the picture were intentionally concealed. Like his subject, Lacouture chose to purposefully withhold from his readers part of the knowledge he did have, while time and again he indulged in supposedly imagining, *viva voce*, what his hero may have thought, *as if* these withheld facts did not exist. What can be the reason for that? A form of partiality: Lacouture *empathizes with the myth*, not with the historical character; in other words, he refuses to *deconstruct* the mythical political icon, of which his biography is ritually celebrating the cult. Whereas Péan's biography raised questions and honestly investigated to provide his readers with elements of answer, Lacouture deliberately refuses to really take into account facts that were public knowledge by the time he wrote and published his text; it is not as if he did not know, but he pretends not to know, for reasons that, whether consciously or unconsciously, may well be demagogic. Both are instances of biography 'correcting' history, but Pierre Péan is modestly offering to correct the myth with facts, whereas Jean Lacouture sidetracks historical facts with a flourished style, the better to reassert the legend.

Works Cited

Lacouture, Jean. *Mitterrand. Une Histoire de Français*. Vol. 1. *Les risques de l'escalade*. Paris : Seuil, 1998.

Lacouture, Jean. *Mitterrand. Une Histoire de Français*. Vol. 2. *Les vertiges du sommet*. Paris : Seuil, 1998.

Mitterrand, François. *Le coup d'État permanent*. Paris : Plon, 1964.

Péan, Pierre. *Une jeunesse française : François Mitterrand 1934-1947*. Paris : Fayard, 1994.