

The Ghosts of World War II

The Year in France

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France is no country for grand old men. The first remarkable event of the year in France in the field of life writing was no doubt the publication of Alain's diaries: *Journal inédit 1937–1950*. Alain is the pen name of Émile-Auguste Chartier (1868–1951), a French philosopher who has become less well-known in recent years, but who had been a role model of sorts for intellectuals like Raymond Aron, Georges Canguilhem, Julien Gracq, André Maurois, or Simone Weil, and who remained a favorite of *lycée* classes in philosophy and literature until the 1980s at least. The discovery of his diaries came as a shock, because in them Alain very frankly reveals his anti-Semitism: on January 28, 1938, he wrote, “Je voudrais bien, pour ma part, être débarrassé de l’antisémitisme, mais je n’y arrive point” [As far as I am concerned, I would like to be rid of anti-Semitism, but I cannot] (63). On August 3, 1940, he wrote: “On verra peut-être si, les juifs éliminés de tout pouvoir, les choses vont mieux. Il se peut mais je n’en sais rien” [Perhaps we shall see if, once the Jews have been eliminated from all sort of power, things go better. It may be, but I don’t know] (432), while on July 23 of the same year, he expressed anti-patriotic opinions and wished for the victory of Nazi Germany: “J’espère que l’Allemand vaincra; car il ne faut pas que le genre de Gaulle l’emporte chez nous” [I hope Germany will prevail, for the De Gaulle style must not be allowed to prevail in this country] (420). The posthumous damage done to his reputation that followed was all the more painful because Alain had so long been considered a wise man. In retrospect, by the damning aspects of the man’s private thoughts revealed by this volume, his works suddenly appeared undeserving of being read. A sense of shame was added to this disappointment for those who had admired the philosopher and would certainly not have had they known these repugnant sides of him.

Shortly after Alain’s diaries came out, Michel Onfray published *Solstice d’hiver: Alain, les juifs, Hitler et l’Occupation*, one of those half-critical, half-biographical essays, for which he has a predilection, that clearly aims at finishing the work of destroying the former intellectual icon. Onfray, a media-savvy maverick

philosopher who prides himself on speaking outside the university, pounced on Alain as another of those great men of the past, like Freud or Tocqueville, whose statues it is his trademark to pull down. Onfray insists on Alain's acceptance of the Vichy regime, his condemnation of the Résistance, his condoning of Gobineau's racial theories, and his silence on these issues once World War II was over. However, Onfray is not averse to great men as such, as his prefacing of a French translation of Ralph Waldo Emerson's work, *Representative Men* [*Hommes représentatifs*], seems to indicate. In fact, he tends to play the part of a moral umpire, damning some figures of the past and lionizing others. Thus, his biographical essay on Henry David Thoreau, *Vivre une vie philosophique: Thoreau le sauvage*, is a panegyric, although it cannot avoid demonstrating that Thoreau's life was in accordance with his philosophical principles only up to a point. "À quoi sert le grand homme?" [What is the use of the great man?] Onfray asks. He continues:

À être un modèle — il nous faut le suivre ; à contaminer par son expérience ; à générer de nouveau de grands hommes ; autrement dit, à assurer le progrès de l'humanité qui, péché contre le marxisme, ne s'accomplit pas avec les masses, mais avec les individualités d'exception. (l. 196)

[To be a model that we must follow, to influence through experience, to generate other great men, thus insuring the progress of mankind which, notwithstanding Marxism, is not brought about by the masses, but by exceptional individuals.]

French biography, it would seem, displays a highly developed interest in subjects from other countries, and this year Americans have continued to be in the limelight. Thus, for instance, Frédéric Martinez's *John Fitzgerald Kennedy* revisits the life of the thirty-fifth US president in the light of what Guy Debord called "society of the spectacle," looking for the man behind the myth in a world where grand façades sometimes hide trivial realities. A similar effort to lift the veil from a glamorous and tragic life characterizes Sophie Adriansen's life of Grace Kelly, *Une Américaine à Monaco*. In a different style, focusing less on an obvious celebrity than on transculturally meaningful figures, in *Des Américaines à Paris* Gérard Bonal makes a prosopography of the creative American women who came to Paris a century ago in search of a freer and a more *bohème* life than they could hope for in their own country at that time, from the more obvious great names of Edith Wharton, Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas, or Isadora Duncan, to great hostesses of literary salons like Natalie Clifford Barney, Winnaretta Singer, later Princess Edmond de Polignac, Mary Cassatt, Egeria of the Impressionists, and other figures like Natalie Barney, Renée Vivien, Romaine Brooks, Anne Morgan, or Augusta and Dorothea Klumpke. By contrast, whereas Bonal's book takes a multiplicity of subjects to bring back to the light partly forgotten women, Vincent Bernard's *Grant* is a much more conventional life of President Ulysses S. Grant, which perpetuates the tradition of the great biography written by a military historian.

Yet another literary event that contributed to the growing attention to life writing in France was the publication of Simone de Beauvoir's *Mémoires* in Gallimard's prestigious special series La Pléiade. The significance of this as a literary event is not so much in the contents of Beauvoir's memoirs, as in the fact that it is with this work that she makes *her entrée dans la Pléiade*, which in the world of French literary institutions is tantamount to a consecration and a confirmation of canonicity. The coverage given to Beauvoir's *Mémoires* in the media, with large excerpts read aloud on the national radio channel *France Culture*, is symptomatic of the public's interest in the lives of writers. In the year's publication of literary biographies, Arlette Jouanna's *Montaigne*, emphasizing the several facets of the personage—the politician, the writer, the private man, etc.—resonates with *Montaigne: une biographie politique* published three years earlier by Philippe Desan, who comments on its method in a meaningful collection of theoretical essays, *Les biographies littéraires: Théories, pratiques et perspectives nouvelles*, the proceedings of a colloquium held at the University of Chicago Center in Paris (6 Rue Thomas Mann, not far from Université Paris VII Diderot and Bibliothèque Nationale). One of the key concepts in this book is what Philippe Desan calls the principle of “constitutability” between the author and the works (67), the origin of which he traces to Montaigne's foreword to the *Essais*: “Ainsi, Lecteur, je suis moy-mesme la matiere de mon livre” (27). This is the opposite of Claude Leroy's “principle of imperviousness between the life and the writing” (228). Every literary biography negotiates a *via media* between these two principles, while too strict an observation of one or the other would entail what Leroy called “l'a-biographie” (228), which fails to engage critically with its subject, leading to a sort of “writing degree zero” of biography.

In quite a different style, Alain Cresciucci's *Roger Nimier Masculin Singulier Pluriel* offers a rare biography of the figurehead of les Hussards, the French literary movement of the 1950s and 60s that dared to challenge Sartrean existentialism. Cresciucci's life of Nimier, composed of clever commentaries on the novelist's works, demonstrates how the brilliant character of the man superseded the figure of the writer. Far from churning out always more *marronniers*, as in journalese we call those predictable lives of the standard great men on anniversary years, the French biography market displays a marked fascination for the lives of individuals who distinguished themselves by their eccentricity, their bravery, their capacity for unconventionality and innovation. Another example is Jocelyne Sauvard's *Simone Veil: La force de la conviction*, published to celebrate the great stateswoman's interment at the Panthéon. Simone Veil, remembered for her brave fight for the decriminalization of abortion and her lifelong fight for the rights of women, was the fifth woman in French history to be admitted under the tutelary motto “Aux Grands Hommes la Patrie reconnaissante.”

Simone Veil, along with her sisters Madeleine and Denise, was a survivor of the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp, where her family was transported in 1944, and from which her parents and brother were never to return. With a similar story,

Jasia Reichardt reconstructs from private archives the life narrative of her own family of Polish Jews of which she is the sole survivor in *Quinze voyages de Varsovie à Londres*, which was published in English translation this year. This prosopographic life narrative is best read in parallel with Audrey Kichelewski's *Les survivants: Les Juifs de Pologne depuis la Shoah*, proposing a more comprehensive study of the fates of Polish Jews through three waves of emigration: from 1944 to the Kielce pogrom in 1946, the Gomulka Aliyah in 1956–1957, and the anti-Zionist campaign occasioned by the Six-Day War in 1967–1968.

Among many other signs that the ghosts of World War II continue to haunt the public, Jerome Fehrenbach's *Von Galen: Un Évêque Contre Hitler*, put out by the Christian publishing house Les Éditions du Cerf, is an apology for Clemens August Graf von Galen, bishop of Münster, beatified by Pope Benedict XVI in 2005 for his brave resistance to the Nazi regime in Germany, opposing the euthanasia program, denouncing the Gestapo, the persecution of the Catholic Church, and the “worship of race” in a pastoral letter as early as 1934. To bear in mind the complexity of the historical situation, in parallel with this life of a worthy German one should read the biography of an ignoble Frenchman: Christian Delporte's *Philippe Henriot* paints a portrait of a villain, the “French Goebbels,” the ultra-collaborationist speaker on the Vichy company Radio Paris, whose pro-Nazi speeches were famously countered by Pierre Dac on Free-French Radio Londres, and who was finally eliminated by a commando of the Résistance's Comité d'Action Militaire (COMAC) in 1944. In the same vein, Nicolas Patin's *Krüger: Un bourreau ordinaire* illustrates the crucial role that Nazi officer Friedrich-Wilhelm Krüger played in the extermination of Polish Jews.

Among the works devoted to World War II, the most original is no doubt *Churchill, le dictionnaire*, by Antoine Capet, perhaps the best French Winston Churchill specialist today, who has published a remarkable French translation of Churchill's *The World Crisis, Volume 1* in 2016. Among the most notable historical biographies this year in France, one should also mention Hervé Leuwers's *Camille et Lucile Desmoulins: Un Rêve de République*. Grounding his work on three previously unpublished letters in *Les Vies Cachées de Gandhi*, Gilles Van Grasdorff claims to make revelations on the sexual life of the Mahatma.

In 2018, the Prix de la Biographie of the Académie française went to Jean-Pierre Bois's *L'abbé de Saint-Pierre: Entre Classicisme et Lumières*, striving to rehabilitate Saint-Pierre as an important philosopher of the first half of the eighteenth century, whose utopian political project for “perpetual peace” is rather forgotten today, in part because of his arduous style of writing. The Grand Prix de la biographie politique was won by Stéphane Courtois for *Lénine, L'inventeur du totalitarisme*, dwelling largely on the communist leader's training years, and portraying him as a megalomaniac ideologue. As its title indicates, it is a typical *biographie à charge*, amounting to an indictment of its subject. The Prix de la biographie de la ville d'Hossegor was awarded to Guillaume Gonin for *Robert Kennedy*, whom he presents as a man who had to fight to assert himself, but also to transform himself,

and a rather chivalrous defender of his marginalized fellow citizens. The Prix de la biographie Le Point/Ville de Nîmes went to Marie-Christine Natta for *Baudelaire*, which strives to disentangle the contradictions of a poet who was much reviled in his own lifetime.

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