

“Ways of Worldmaking”

The Year in France

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“Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life,” wrote Oscar Wilde (39). Speaking of Bruno Nuytten’s 1988 biopic of Camille Claudel, Dominique Bona says, “Il n’avait pas voulu romancer : la vie de Camille était suffisamment romanesque pour qu’on n’ait rien à inventer” [he didn’t want to novelize: Camille’s life was sufficiently novelesque as it was, so that there was nothing to invent] (212). But the *novelesque* in biography is not so much a question of writing style, as of *lifestyle* properly speaking. It is not relevant principally in the sense of narrative history presenting historical facts in the aesthetic form of the novel, or just a process of literary creation inspired from real life, or even of a nonfictional novel à la Truman Capote. Much more specifically in biography, it is a matter of the subtle ways one lives one’s own life under the more or less conscious influence of the novels one has read.

Thus, in *Dans les geôles de Sibérie*, Yoann Barbereau relates his tribulation in Russia, from the catastrophic moment when, as he was head of the Alliance Française at Irkutsk in 2015, he was suddenly arrested on fabricated accusations, beaten, imprisoned, detained in a psychiatric hospital, and sentenced to fifteen years of “severe detention” in a camp in Siberia. He managed to escape, and at the end of a long, perilous journey across Russia, reached the French embassy in Moscow, where he had to wait another year before he could finally be exfiltrated. In a life narrative that reads like a thriller, Barbereau recounts this period of his life that went out of control as the result of *kompromat*, or a defamation campaign. His own perception of the ordeal was partly shaped by the Russian novels he had read and those he was reading while trapped in the situation, especially Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita*. This case is representative of a post-factual age in which deliberately libelous biographical stories can trip an individual’s life into an extended nightmare. Barbereau recorded his experience live, in diary notebooks that serve as the source of a life narrative with literary qualities that rival those of the best fiction, between spy-thriller, initiation novel, and travel narrative. The actual motivations of the *kompromat* that Barbereau claims to have experienced, whether private or political, remain obscure to this day.

The unease created by the malleability of public figures through biographical narratives, ranging from panegyric to libel, is certainly a sign of the times. Thus Nelson Goodman used to say that “the underlying world . . . is perhaps on the whole a world well lost” (4), and insisted that “of course, we must distinguish falsehood and fiction from truth and fact; but we cannot, I am sure, do it on the ground that fiction is fabricated and fact found” (91). This is certainly one of the main reasons for our interest in George Orwell, because of a feeling that the dystopic world of 1984 was somehow prophetic of the society we live in in terms of both factual relativity and technological surveillance. That this is a contemporary worry is confirmed, among other instances, by the publication of a French translation of *Mémoires vives* by Edward Snowden, “l’homme qui a tout risqué pour dénoncer la surveillance globale” [the man who risked everything to denounce global surveillance]. Remarkably, three biographical works on Orwell came in a row: Adrien Jaulmes’s *Sur les traces de George Orwell*, Christopher Hitchens’s *Dans la tête d’Orwell* in translation, and Pierre Christin’s graphic biography *Orwell*.

In this context characterized by exacerbated struggles in several fields to remodel the doxa, which beyond public opinion amounts to the self-image a nation entertains of itself as a political entity with a life of its own, biography finds itself in the front row, as it is bound to do in such periods. There are memories one wants to forget, others one wants to reclaim from oblivion, and others still one strives to revise, sometimes with desperate energy. One edifying example of the first sort is the regularly resurgent polemic about Louis-Ferdinand Céline, the “écrivain maudit” of twentieth-century France, whose *Cahiers de prison* edited by Jean Paul Louis came out a few months after Antoine Gallimard, yielding to the pressure of public opinion, had to renounce the publication of a new edition of Céline’s *Bagatelles pour un massacre* and other antisemitic pamphlets—although they had already been republished by the underground publishing house Omnia Veritas in 2016 and in Québec by Éditions 8 in *Écrits polémiques* in 2012. Speaking of the *Cahiers de prison*, Bertrand Leclair in *Le Monde* says they are “aussi insupportables qu’ils sont précieux” [as unbearable as they are precious], in an article with a telling title: “autoportrait de Céline en salaud délirant” [autoportrait of Céline as a delirious bastard]. In 2008, when they were issued as facsimiles in Henri Godard’s *Un autre Céline*, Philippe Sollers wrote that “même si on déteste Céline, on ne peut lire sans émotion ses deux cahiers de prison” [even if one hates Céline, one cannot read them without emotion]. In this case, the reception is divided between admiration for the extreme freedom of the style and reproach for the clear noxiousness of the political opinions. However, it is remarkable that the fiction and the pamphlets seem more obnoxious than the journals or *cahiers*, although the latter contain much of the material that would go into Céline’s novels of the following decade. Perhaps that is because one tends to see life writing as less ideologically virulent than other genres.

Aiming conversely to reclaim from oblivion half-forgotten lives, two books on the frontier zone between biography and history fall into the loose category of collective life narratives, or prosopographies, insofar as they investigate the lives of

several individuals who are representative of a socio-historical group. In *L'appel de la guerre: Des adolescents au combat, 1914–1918*, Manon Pignot studies teenagers who voluntarily enrolled in the European, Russian, and American armies during World War I. Pignot seeks to explore their mentalities, as far as this can be guessed from the rare photographs, letters, and notebooks they have left. Some were young people who rebelled against parental authority; others were motivated by the war-mongering discourses of their time or by a romantic quest for heroism. Beyond the initiation rite of the baptism of fire, they found a place of their own in the regiments, often as mascots. They were generally boys, like Jean-Corentin Taché and André Bianco, but also girls, lying about their sex and their age, and cutting off their long hair—some in France, like Émilienne Moreau, but most of them in Russia, like Maria Urlova, or in Poland, like Sofia Nowosielska. The book revives the memory of people whose peculiar commitments would otherwise have been forgotten. Manon Pignot was awarded the Prix Pierre Lafue 2019 for this remarkable work, published by the young publishing house Anamosa, founded in 2016 by Chloé Pathé with the goal of promoting original narrative nonfiction.

It is in the form of a novel, *Un soleil en exil*, that Réunionese writer Jean-François Sam-Long denounces the sad fate of thousands of young people from the overseas French department of La Réunion, who, between 1963 and 1982, were transported to Metropolitan France when Michel Debré, then member of parliament for Réunion, decided that Réunionese orphans and abandoned children would be better off in mainland France, where they served to repopulate the central rural areas suffering from serious depopulation. These “Enfants de la Creuse,” as they are commonly called by the name of a department that received many of them, were entrusted to farmers who more often than not exploited them as quasi-slaves. In 2014, the Assemblée Nationale adopted a resolution that recognized the “moral responsibility” of the French state, and appointed a commission to investigate, and as far as possible to repair, the damage done. The question has been the subject of several essays by academics such as Ivan Jablonka, Gilles Ascaride, Corine Spagnoli, and Philippe Vitale, but also of several autobiographical narratives, such as those of Jean-Jacques Martial or Jean-Pierre Gosse, as well as the main theme of many novels, of which Jean-François Sam-Long’s is the most recent.

One of the most remarkable biographies of a woman this year is Philippe Blanchon’s life of Gertrude Stein, who lived in Paris from 1904 to her death in 1946. Above and beyond the impressive American modernist writer and art collector herself, Blanchon’s work depicts cosmopolitan Paris’s artistic and intellectual life in the first half of the twentieth century, more particularly in the 1930s, and the years of German occupation, during which Gertrude Stein was particularly exposed, and entertained an ambiguous relationship with collaborationist Bernard Fay.¹ Celebrating another great woman, Kate Kirkpatrick’s life of Simone de Beauvoir appeared in French translation barely one year after the English original: *Devenir Beauvoir, la force de la volonté* fortunately makes up for the strange paucity of biographies of the author of *Le deuxième sexe*.

Other biographers turn to less famous women, with the aim of recovering

from relative obscurity some astonishing women. For instance, Frédéric Lavignette studies Germaine Berton, the anarchist who in 1923 murdered Marius Plateau, head of the extreme right organization Action Française and its militant wing, Les Camelots du Roi. She had wanted to kill Léon Daudet, a more famous member of the same movement, but he simply happened not to be there when she burst into the office. Berton declared that she had wanted to avenge Jean Jaurès, the socialist leader murdered in 1914. Lavignette's publisher, L'Échappée, is an independent, and clearly radical, publishing house, preferring to publish more countercultural and libertarian work. In a similar manner, although at the other end of the ideological spectrum, the very traditional Perrin is the publisher of François Joyaux's life of Nam Phuong, the last empress of Vietnam, as consort of Emperor Bao Dai. From the abolition of the French protectorate on Vietnam by Roosevelt in 1945 until her death in 1963, the life of Nam Phuong is the story of an inexorable fall. Even more interesting is Anne Kerlan's *Lin Zhao: Combattante de la liberté*, which tells the life of this young poet and journalist who rebelled against the communist dictatorship in China. Imprisoned from the age of twenty-nine, she was beaten and tortured daily and literally wrote with her own blood, drawn from her hands with a hairpin, on her own clothes and torn pieces of bedsheets. She was finally sentenced to death at the age of thirty-six and executed by gunshot on the same day, April 19, 1968, in Shanghai. For this biography of Lin Zhao, Anne Kerlan, who is head of the Centre d'études sur la Chine moderne et contemporaine at the CNRS-EHESS, was awarded the Prix du Sénat du Livre d'histoire, and the Prix de la Biographie du *Point*.

Still in the category of women's lives, *Le Monde* presented its readers with an unusual biographical form. Revisiting a mode of publication traditionally used for fiction, in the summer of 2020 the daily afternoon newspaper published a serial biography, *Catherine Deneuve, derrière l'écran* by Raphaëlle Bacqué. Deneuve has asserted herself as a rebel for much of her career. During the struggle for the legalization of abortion, ultimately achieved by Health Minister Simone Veil in 1975, Deneuve was one of the celebrities who signed the *Manifesto of the 343*. But in 2018 she opposed the excesses of the #MeToo movement as one of 100 famous women who signed a tribune in *Le Monde*. It is not impossible that by publishing Bacqué's biography of Deneuve, *Le Monde* was attempting to counter accusations of being a vector of *le politiquement correct*, often perceived in this country as an American ideology.

Some literary prizes for biographies, as we have seen, have been awarded to original works, often devoted to women or to less predictable subjects, and indeed this seems to be a general tendency. Thus, the Prix de l'Académie Française was jointly awarded to Geneviève Haroche-Bouzinac for *Louise de Vilmorin: Une vie de bohème* and Guillemette de Sairigné for *Pechkoff, le manchot magnifique*. The Prix Brantôme was awarded to Alain Quella-Villéger for *Pierre Loti: Une vie de roman*. The Grand Prix de la Biographie Politique Saint-Thomas went to Bertrand le Gendre's life of former Tunisian President Habib Bourguiba. Laure Adler won the Prix de la Biographie de la ville d'Hossegor for her biography of architect and

designer Charlotte Perriand, and Patrick de Gmeline received the Grand Prix Catholique de Littérature for *François de Sales, le gentilhomme de Dieu*. Prince Michel de Grèce was awarded the Prix Combours Chateaubriand for his memoirs: *Avec ou sans couronne*.

As for other biographies that did not win literary prizes, among those devoted to historical and political figures, two in particular stand out from the rest. Maxime Tandonnet's *André Tardieu l'incompris* retraces the life of this great admirer of the US, who, as Président du Conseil des Ministres of the Third Republic from 1929 to 1932, strove against the odds to adapt the American economic model to France while the country foundered during the Great Depression: a French model of a *droite libérale* political leader that endures to this day. The other historical biography that deserves particular attention is Anne Bernet's *Monseigneur Thuan, un évêque face au communisme*: a life of François-Xavier Nguyễn Văn Thuân, bishop of Nha Trang, archbishop of Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City), later appointed cardinal, who spent thirteen years in communist jails before he was liberated and exiled in 1988.

On the eve of Bastille Day 2020, Bernard Cottret died, and so in the midst of a dreadful year France lost one of her finest biographers. His last work, *Les Tudors*, remained faithful to the central theme of an intellectual life devoted the great figures of Protestantism.

Note

1. See also Antoine Compagnon's *Le cas Bernard Fay*.

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