
H-France Forum Volume 2, Issue 4 (Fall 2007), No. 2

Christian Jouhaud, *Sauver le Grand-Siècle? Présence et transmission du passé*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2007. 315 pp. 23.00 Euros (pb.). ISBN 9-78-20203-76266.

Review Essay by Malina Stefanovska, University of California Los Angeles.

Sauver le Grand-Siècle? is a project that grows, willingly, in the interstices: between facts and interpretations, between history and literature, and between the past perceived either as heritage or as a living presence. Its object is the “Great Century”, a period that allegedly informs present French identity, but is often institutionally transmitted as a sumptuous dead monument which no longer speaks to us. In Jouhaud’s opinion, to consider the seventeenth century as “a heritage to be celebrated” threatens it with “death by choking” from which it can only be rescued by seeing it as a fragile, ruined dwelling to be re-appropriated by and for the present times. In other termswords, the remote past can become part of the historian’s present only by responding to the urgency of his or her own times. In support of this thesis, at the outset of his book Jouhaud begins by quotes quoting Walter Benjamin who deemed that we can rescue past phenomena from the “catastrophe” of their “enshrinement as heritage,” only by recognizing the “fissures” within them.[1] With a poetic scope and eye, Jouhaud therefore sets out to show on a variety of historical issues how the seventeenth century can be revisited not as a dead monument, but as affecting us in the present, as it does in the famous “madeleine” experience lived by the Proustian narrator. Conversely, Jouhaud also demonstrates how one immediate testimony, written in the seventeenth-century, becomes the object of a willed transmission, a monument.

In a somewhat elaborate construction which penetrates the past through discursive loci such as vision, entering, commemoration, childhood, borders, or spaces, Jouhaud constantly juxtaposes two “historiographic acts” which illustrate his thesis and method: his close reading of a little known witness accounttext from the reign of Louis XIV, and his interpretation of a number of critical debates or writings on seventeenth century history, art and culture. In this architecture, the methodological “inversion of places” that he proposes becomes more apparent: on the one sidehand, the direct witness from is treated as an historian who, in the very act of writing down his account, models it as a symbolic patrimony and a site for constructing and affirming his authorial self; on the other sidehand, later debates bearing on that period are taken “as testimonies of the act of making the past present”. Again, Benjamin’s insight is cited as an inspiration: “Creating, for an historian, does not mean knowing ‘how things really happened’. It means taking a hold of a memory, such as it emerges in the moment of danger.”[2] The philosopher’s personal destiny tragically came to illustrate his statement: in his last letter to Gretel Adorno, shortly before his failed attempt to escape from occupied France in 1940 and his suicide, Benjamin wrote: “I have brought with me only one book: the memoirs of the cardinal de Retz. Thus, alone in my room, I plead to the “Great Century”.[3] The Memoirs of another persecuted exile were to provide the philosopher with a historical perspective on his own plight, which, in turn, informed his understanding of the past. Jouhaud masterfully brings to light such a personal relationships within most of the scholarship on the “Grand-Siècle”.

If considering history from within an unstable present is the paradigm for “rescuing” it, Jouhaud does it by presenting several cases in which historical knowledge is linked to the historian’s personal memory or affect, in an inversion of the sequence theorized by Paul Ricœur, where personal memory in the form of affect is reworked into historical knowledge. A paradigmatic case is Marc Bloch whose description in his journal, in 1915, of a medieval church where he attended a mass for fallen fellow soldiers Jouhaud interprets as an unconscious attempt to bring alive the church builders’ “civilized” past. The historian’s passionate immersion in history is motivated by his distress over the First World War savagery. Jouhaud’s subsequent analyses address other issues usually transmitted as part of the crucial heritage of

the “Grand-Siècle”: Pascal’s philosophy, the baroque, the history of Protestantism, absolutist power, and others. He follows their initial construction and their historical reinterpretations in a series of singular writing literary acts, ranging from Voltaire’s strategy in “The Age of XIV”, through debates on the notion of the baroque, to conflicted interpretations of protestant uprisings, etc. It is not a coincidence that such a vast endeavor should be carried out by a historian most so attuned to writing and literature whose acknowledged models are such interdisciplinary figures as Walter Benjamin, Michel de Certeau, Paul Bénichou, and Louis Marin.

As Jouhaud’s book develops, it sets off the “historiographic acts” he revisits in a rich relief against the usual dichotomies, opening up— as suggested by the ambiguous title and its accompanying question mark— on to fruitful ambivalence: for it is both an exercise in reviving history and in blurring its borders, or even questioning its ultimate worth. One can only assume that a similar sense of urgency motivated him to address the present institutional response of France to its past. The case of Pascal, among others, brings the point to the fore. Jouhaud revisits this paragon of the French cultural heritage through a collection of commemorative essays dedicated to him in the nineteen thirties 1930s, as well as through some more recent debates. He contrasts views expounded by prominent literary historians who aim to enshrine Pascal in the establishment’s cultural values, with an anachronistic but more productive perspective, taken by one contributor to the essays, a minor poet who saw Pascal as a solitary fellow writer whose apologetic project was a splendid failure. Such an approach, informed by the romantic myth of the genius, in Jouhaud’s eyes has the merit of acknowledging that this literary figure, a long dead monument to the French mind, can come alive in new ways for different readers in different times. From the perspective of a twenty first- century U.S. scholar of the French “Grand Siècle” (mine, as it happens) this comes as no surprise: a past text from the past cannot survive on the sole authority of the cultural institution transmitting it. It has to speak to the present times. Jouhaud’s analysis of Paul Bénichou’s seminal work on seventeenth- century ethics, also convincingly makes the point: finishing the *Morales du Grand-Siècle*, in 1939-40, before his revocation from the military because of anti-Jewish Vichy laws, Bénichou wrote, that “The examination of what happened long ago takes its real meaning and use only in relation to the present and the future.”[4] Jouhaud convincingly demonstrates how the critic’s humanistic views are enmeshed in the conflict between civilizing values and repressive forces of discipline and authority at play in 1940. This also enables him to affirm his conviction that the scholar “mobilizes” the century he studies in order to find a meaning to his own present. Another example of such an appropriation is Voltaire, who constructs his Age of Louis XIV through cleverly deconstructing the precise perspective from which seventeenth-century testimonies and memoirs on which he drew were written: through his rhetoric more than by explicit assertions, the historian turns their piety into superstition, the miracles they report into tricks, by positioning himself both as a witness and a ruthless interpreter of past events. Jouhaud argues that Voltaire operates by establishing a boundary between the - still so close - past that he narrates and the present from which he is writing (p. 54). Another example is Chateaubriand who, in his turn, implicitly reworks Voltaire’s lay historiography through his narrative strategy in order to set against it his “Life of Rancé,” inspired by the desire to glorify Christianity. In these and other instances, Jouhaud successfully shows that such treatment is not accidental to historiography but is its very substance.

The most fascinating of his interpretations is, to in my opinion, is his tracking of the successive re-appropriations of the seventeenth- century protestant Camisard revolt in the Cévennes by historians and writers across the religious (catholic/protestant) and ideological (left/right) divide, from the seventeenth century to the present. Jouhaud masterfully uncovers the complex mechanism by which a historical event may function as a religious legend, a childhood memory, and a moral reading of events to come. Up to the early twentieth century, the protestant insurgency (the history of which was occulted by the official version of French national unity as well as by its oral transmission and its somewhat mythical aura) formed the mindset of protestant youth to whom it was transmitted. Thus, for instance, the protection granted to Jewish children in the traditional Huguenot regions of France was motivated by the protestant interpretation of the persecution of Jews in light of their own history, and the meaning

attached to the notion of “the Refuge”. Starting from more recent accounts of the ideological fracture between protestant and catholic youth in the Cévennes, Jouhaud is thus able to work back – via Voltaire and his subsequent interpretations by 19th nineteenth-century historians – to the first constructions of the Camisard myth and history, those that may even have influenced, as Jouhaud argues, the political construction of the Loudun affair in the seventeenth century. He convincingly demonstrates the political stakes involved in declaring that the Loudun nuns suffered from diabolical possession, and in the bringing to trial, sentencing and burning of the priest, father Urbain, as well as the subsequent motives of eighteenth-century historians who re-wrote this history as a means to eradicating superstition. In all these instances, Jouhaud convincingly demonstrates how historiography is constructed by the urgency of its own times and brings up another of its crucial mechanisms – the role of forgetting – for its reemergence as present.

Throughout the book, Jouhaud’s interpretations of other historians’ writings are weaved in with his close reading of the Journal written by a seventeenth-century royal valet, Marie Du Bois, first published in full, as *Mémoires de Marie Du Bois, sieur de Lestournière et du Poirier, gentilhomme servant du roi, valet de chambre de Louis XIII et de Louis XIV, 1647-76*, (1936), then again, under the title *Moi, Marie Du Bois, gentilhomme vendômois, valet de chambre de Louis XIV* (Rennes, éditions Apogée, 1994). Marie Du Bois (1601-1679) was a small minor notable who served Louis XIII, left France with his sister, the Duchess of Savoy, and after a few years returned to the court and bought half of an office of a royal valet to Louis XIV. Du Bois alternated periods of service to the king and then to his son, the Dauphin, with stays on his estate of Poirier where he wrote his journal. As his nobleility title, entirely derived from his office, was threatened, his writing, Jouhaud argues, allowed him to assert and defend his social status. It also enabled him to spiritualize his social experience and to bequeath it as symbolic heritage to his descendents. In other termswords, Jouhaud reads Du Bois’ text not as first-hand testimony but as an already effected symbolic transformation, the “vestiges of a production”, both of historiography and of the self (p. 37), in a process whereby “self-consciousness revealed to the self through action is formalized by transmitting itself through the narrative of the action” (p. 40). Although Jouhaud’s reading of Du Bois’ *Memoirs*’ is very enjoyable, its constant juxtaposition with his other interpretations leaves me somewhat unconvinced. Jouhaud skillfully detects and highlights the details in which this pious, arranged and self-serving narrative touches the contemporary reader: for instance Du Bois’ very human anger at seeing his master, the young Dauphin, mistreated by his preceptors, or his touching account of his twelve-year-old son, crying with cold on a winter ride, or the extraordinary wish, registered in his last will, to be buried (literally) on his mother’s bosom (“dans son giron”). Such details truly make a person and his times come alive better than formal, beautified accounts of the Grand Siècle. But while Jouhaud is right to show how a remote document’s very alterity can make it present to today’s readers, his analysis of Du Bois’ writing as action is sometimes a bit self-evident. He also seems to posit an essential difference between reading literary and historical texts, denying that Du Bois’ journal can be approached as a literary work, in his terms, “as a work occupying a place in literary history.” I am not convinced that the process is all that different, as the very details he cites as resisting a historian’s interpretation, are also those which tempt (and resist!) the literary critic: indeed I found it hard to see in what way Jouhaud’s reading differs from a literary interpretation when he detects in Du Bois’ writing not only his asserted piety and faith into his masters, but also underlying stakes or feelings that inform his action narrative (p. 36).

These few reserves, however, do not diminish the great value of Jouhaud’s fine inquiry into sSeventeenth-century history, as well as into the very foundations of historiography and its transmission of the past. It is a pertinent – and timely – work, convincing, without yielding to the simplification of the complex and fragile bond between past and present.

NOTES

[1] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, transl. from German by H. Eiland and K. Mc Laughlin (Cambridge and London: Harvard Univ. Press, 1999), p. 473.

[2] Gretel Adorno-Walter Benjamin, *Briefwechsel 1930-40*, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2005), my translation from the French original.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Paul Bénichou, *Morales du Grand Siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), p. 123. My translation.

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See also the Review Essays on this book by Katherine Crawford and Orest Ranum, as well as Christian Jouhaud's response to all three Review Essays.

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ISSN 1557-7058