

H-France Review Vol. 7 (April 2007), No. 50

Nicole Thatcher and Ethel Tolansky, Eds., *Six Authors in Captivity: Literary Responses to the Occupation of France during World War II.* Oxford and New York: Peter Lang, 2006. 192 pp. Bibliography and index. (Pb). ISBN 3-03910-520-5.

Review by William J. Cloonan, Florida State University.

Six Authors in Captivity attempts to situate itself in both historical studies and literary analysis, yet it is ill-at-ease in both domains. This volume consists of a series of essays by various contributors who examine the ways six French citizens used writing as a means of coping with imprisonment during the Occupation. These prisoners ranged from *résistants*, prisoners-of-war, to Max Jacob, whose only offense was being a Jew. While the subject seems interesting enough, what mars this study is the tendency to broad historical and aesthetic generalizations. In her "Introduction," Nicole Thatcher sets the tone for what will follow. Concerning the people whose writings will be discussed, she notes that the "range of their identities ... stand[s] as paradigms for the variety of people in France who opposed the war situation" (p. 14). This is true to an extent, but the fact remains that active opposition to Nazism during the war remained a minority activity. Nevertheless, the tenor of this volume supports the Gaullist myth that the Resistance was a widespread activity throughout France, one that united people of different creeds and different political persuasions. Although the authors under review provide a wealth of historical and biographical detail, there is no effort to provide the larger historical context of the Resistance movement in France.

Most of the writers examined here turned to poetry while in prison, and this leads Thatcher to claim that the "writing of poetry was especially considered with suspicion by the Vichy authorities and by the German occupiers" (p. 15). While there is truth in this statement, it tends to elide the fact that any potentially subversive writing was a cause for alarm in Vichy and Occupied France, and undoubtedly the text that came to exemplify resistance to the German Occupation was a prose work, Vercors' novel, *Le Silence de la mer* (1942). Thatcher does offer three explanations for prisoners' preference for poetry, of which the third, that poems could be short and easy to memorize (p. 20) is at once modest and quite sensible. However, to maintain that poetry was the preferred form because it "seems to convey above all feelings" (p. 19) is extremely reductionist, while her statement that poetry lends itself to subversion "through layers of meaning" (pp. 19-20) can be equally true of prose.

The essays included in this volume generally follow a pattern which consists of a brief biographical sketch of the author being studied and then an exposition of the circumstances which landed him or her in prison. The rest of the essay is then given over to a discussion of the prisoner's writing. Curiously enough, what often stand out in these pages are more the courage and imaginative responses of the prisoner to confinement than the actual writing he or she produced. Jennifer Ross' "Jean Cassou: Freedom to Compose in Captivity," is a case in point. Jean Cassou was an early member of the Resistance who was imprisoned in 1941. What he did to survive his incarceration is truly remarkable. His 33 *Sonnets composés au secret* were "written" entirely in his head, memorized and not confined to paper until after his release in 1943.

While the story Ross tells of Cassou's use of poetry to survive confinement is fascinating, her analysis of the poems is not. Succumbing as does almost every contributor to this volume to over-generalization, she suggests that these poems attest to Cassou's "journey of self-discovery" (p. 34). Few would question this remark, but it is so obviously true as to be applicable to all sorts of artists working in all sorts of art

forms and in all sorts of circumstances. Nevertheless, much of the literary analysis in this and the other contributions remains on this level. It would have been more helpful in this particular essay to have engaged with the clearly surrealistic quality of the poetry in an effort to determine what would prompt Cassou, like Jean Cayrol and Philippe Soupault, also treated in this volume, to turn to the surreal in an effort to capture the reality of their lives during the Occupation.

The only *résistante* discussed in this study is Madeleine Riffaud. The fact that she is a woman is perhaps less important than Riffaud's own attitude toward the Resistance and how greatly it is at odds with historical reality. Madeleine Riffaud is one of the great heroines of the Resistance. She joined the struggle against Nazism early, fought alongside of men, lost friends and a beloved to the violence and sickness engendered by wartime conditions. After the war she became a well-known political reporter, filing stories for *L'Humanité* from Algeria and Indochina. Her credentials as an opponent of political oppression and racial intolerance are impeccable and if her memories today of the Resistance are somewhat Romantic, she is certainly entitled to them.

Nevertheless, in a study that purports to shed light on aspects of the wartime experience, it does not seem permissible to record without greatly commenting upon Riffaud's belief that "for her and her companions in the Resistance, the aim was 'de délivrer la belle prisonnière dans la tour'" (p. 138). While it is certainly true that the story of the Resistance is more than a cold assemblage of facts and that the passions of the participants need to be recognized, Nathalie Thatcher's "*On l'appelait Rainier: Madeleine Riffaud Revisits her War,*" would have benefited from a much more extensive discussion of memory and history as influenced by the passage of time, and even of fidelity to long-dead brothers/sisters-in-arms.

In a similar vein, the authors of these essays might have expanded their treatment of their subjects by not limiting their analyses of the poems to attempts at identifying the often hermetic allusions, or explaining how a reference refers to a particular incident the poet experienced or witnessed. It is no disrespect to those writing in prison to recognize, as does Ian Higgins in his "Preface," that the poetry produced under these trying circumstances need not be interesting because of its great quality (p. 8), but rather for what the poem shows about human behavior under great stress. It would appear the principal aim of most of these works was not to alert the French to the evils of the Occupation, or even to encourage armed opposition; the goal was to help an imprisoned individual survive personal hardship and perhaps to a lesser degree deal with a sense of national humiliation. Despite whatever these men and woman had done to incur the wrath of Vichy and/or the Nazis, during their incarceration their resistance was more personal than political and its expression largely took the form of poetry. Given this situation, it would have been useful to have a more extended discussion of the writer's individual motives for writing, as well as of literature's ability to empower the powerless.

The most satisfying essay in the collection is Debra Kelly's "Philippe Soupault and 'Ode à Londres bombardée': Imprisonment, Revolt and Images of Resistance." Kelly's background discussed focuses on Soupault's psychological image of London; it was the place where as a young man in 1914 he had the first revelation of his vocation as a poet. In poetry between the two world wars, London embodied for Soupault aspects of his personal identity, while at the same time remaining a real city. As a result, when he undertook the writing of "Ode à Londres bombardée," it was only natural that the suffering of the city and its inhabitants would also serve as an image of his own duress. Kelly develops this correlation nicely and then goes on to show how "Ode à Londres" contributed to the growth of the "myth of the Blitz" (p. 179), wherein London becomes the symbol of England's collective resistance. In his poem, Soupault was able to give full voice to his personal and political frustration and courage without ever ceasing to be a poet. Understandably enough, this was a feat that eluded most of the writers discussed in this collection.

In her "Conclusion," Ethel Tolansky does address to a degree the conundrum that noble sentiments and heroic acts have nothing to do with the creation of enduring art or, for that matter, with art at all. Yet

for the most part she contents herself with palliatives on the order of “in the battle of the inhuman against the human, the human spirit can win” (p. 188). *Six Authors in Captivity* is a book of generous intention; it seeks to chronicle artistic strategies for survival and the maintenance of dignity under extreme pressure. However its content is rarely *à la hauteur* of its intentions or its subjects.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Ian Higgins, “Preface”

Nicole Thatcher, “Introduction”

Jennifer Ross, “Jean Cassou: Freedom to Compose in Captivity”

Ethel Tolansky, “Jean Cayrol: Writing and Survival”

Olga Rosenbaum, “Max Jacob: The Integrity of the Writer”

Nicole Thatcher, “On l’appelait Rainer: Madeleine Riffaud Revisits her War”

Bernard Baritaud, “Pierre-Henri Simon: A Certain Idea of Man”

Debra Kelly, “Philippe Soupault and ‘Ode à Londres bombardée’: Imprisonment, Revolt and Images of Resistance”

Ethel Tolansky, “Conclusion”

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H-France Review Vol. 7 (April 2007), No. 50

ISSN 1553-9172