

H-France Review Vol. 10 (March 2010), No. 53

Sylvain Venayre, *La Gloire de l'aventure. Genèse d'une mystique moderne, 1850-1940*. Paris : Aubier, 2002. 350 pp. Notes, name index, table of contents. \$66.99 U.S. (pb). ISBN 2-70-072332-5.

Review by Laurence M. Porter, Michigan State University.

Is serious historical scholarship incompatible with writing about adventure? Venayre deals with this slippery question appropriately by historicizing it. He claims that historiography and adventure each have their own history, but that these histories intersected during the period from 1850-1940. He claims that history became a scientific discipline (in France, we presume) only in the late nineteenth century, until the imposition of a Marxist infrastructure de-emphasized historians' searches for formative individual insights that served as motors for history. Meanwhile, Venayre believes, the adventurer was considered an opportunistic scoundrel or mercenary soldier until *l'imaginaire social* or sociolect came gradually to glorify the adventurer as a hero, in a collective movement of popular culture that crystallized around 1930. This evolution, as the title plainly indicates, is his main subject. He introduces it effectively by tracing the shifting meanings of "aventurier" in French: from a foreign mercenary (fourteenth century) to a freebooter (late seventeenth century) to an unscrupulous con man (late eighteenth to early nineteenth) to someone seeking fame and fortune in foreign lands from ca. 1850 on (pp. 34-39).

As he begins to define his subject, Venayre's prompt capitulation to subjectivity ("l'aventure est d'abord le fruit d'un regard pose sur l'événement," p. 14) precludes a systematic understanding of his topic. Here are some provisional suggestions concerning which elements adventure in Venayre's sense, considered as "an ideal type," involves. Probably, few people would accept all of them, and few concrete instances would conform to all of them. In short, a methodical consideration of a subjective phenomenon will generate a "fuzzy set" of examples. These can incite discussion but not resolve differences of opinion. Take publicity, for example. Adventure becomes adventure only once it has been reported to consumers of the media—ranging serious scholarly books to entertaining fantasies (such as the film "Raiders of the Lost Ark"). The reporter who joins an adventure as a spectator can become a second-degree hero or an accessory after the fact. Then there is the material setting. Such adventures do not involve opening "the doors of perception," confronting one's terrors, or achieving enlightenment. In Rimbaud, frequently discussed by Venayre, we find a radical dichotomy between the visionary, literary adventure, and the restless wandering life afterward. In that life, the former poet eventually settled on trying to outdo his missing father, an army officer, by gun-running, so that he symbolically achieves a higher level of control, profiting from wars rather than having to fight them.

In terms of the sociolect ("common knowledge") of the culture from which the adventurer comes, the lands to be explored and the peoples and dangers encountered are unfamiliar. A "first ascent" of a peak by a new route (new because its apparent difficulty has prevented anyone from climbing it before) is an adventure; subsequent ascents by the same route are not. Risk of death is freely assumed, but not routinized. "Adventure travel" is the contrary: it follows well-beaten paths, on which paid guides minimize the dangers of death because they want to attract additional clients. Being a NASCAR driver is heroic; being a war pilot within range of enemy fire may also be admirable, depending on the cause (as judged by the sociolect, which will always be inherently unstable, because opinions can split or evolve,

or both). But neither vocation is an adventure. The inclusion of Saint-Exupéry in Venayre's list of major adventurers contradicts this criterion. Similarly, the *flâneur* and hobo are no adventurers; they wander, but do not place their lives at risk—the sailor, even less so, because he follows someone else's itinerary, at least during the course of each voyage.

The absence of handicaps, whether inseparable from one's condition or self-imposed, also arises. Adventure assumes an experienced protagonist in the prime of life, and adequately equipped according to the standards of the time. Crossing Antarctica for the first time is an adventure; crossing Antarctica on skis, on foot, on crutches, as a child, or faster than the previous record-holder is not an adventure. Modifying the conditions of an adventure does not create a new one. The adventurer undertakes a self-assigned mission, rather than volunteers for one. Columbus, therefore, does not count as an adventurer because he voyaged as a subsidized servant of the Spanish crown. Moreover, the ideal type of adventure is not primarily assumed for the sake of conquest or wealth. Piracy, crime in general, treasure hunting, gold rushes, and colonization are not adventures in Venayre's sense. Would-be colonizers succeed because they enjoy an overwhelming military advantage. For example, the Emperor of Vietnam surrendered to the French in 1883 to prevent them from slaughtering the civilian population of the Imperial City of Hué by bombarding it from naval gunships. And colonizers usually represent the unknown to their victims more than they encounter it: the Spanish in Latin America mystified and terrorized the Native Americans with their firearms, their armor, their horses—and they corresponded to mythic descriptions of the gods who were expected to arrive unpredictably.

At the opposite extreme from such greed as a motivation, altruistic concern for one's fellows, ranging from the daring rescue and the heroic resistance of a small squad to the courageous suicide to save other lives do not count as adventure either, because such behavior is imposed by external circumstances. Adventure is a private-sector rather than a public-sector enterprise. In this respect, French culture differs from American culture. Pierre Boulle's adventure novel *Planet of the Apes*, for example, depicts an interstellar voyage of exploration sponsored and undertaken by a wealthy businessman. The American film version represents it as a NASA mission with a uniformed crew. At the conclusion, the hero's discovery of the Statue of Liberty half-buried in the sand makes him aware that—without aging—he has unwittingly returned to his home planet, Earth, three hundred years after his departure, to find that a nuclear holocaust has occurred and that three species of non-human higher primates have taken over, driving terrified human survivors into the jungle where they have reverted to savagery. To clarify, the French adventure novel takes place on the margins of history: the American equivalent exploits history unscrupulously as a depository of raw material available for travesty. This distinction between the two cultures does not always hold, but it is widespread.

Adventure as we experience it vicariously is ordinarily an individual enterprise, reported in the first person ("directly," meaning at only one remove from the reader), so that the ostensible authorship of the retrospective account focuses on a single figure. Although Sir Edmund Hillary, for example, gave full and respectful credit to the Sherpa Tensing Norkay for his role in their joint "conquest" of Mount Everest, it is with Hillary's subjectivity that we readers mainly identify. Paradoxically, in order to be recognized, the adventurer must be strong and silent during the adventure, but loquacious afterward. Venayre appropriately emphasizes the adventurer's individualism, but much less so the craft and tactics of his or her authorship.

Venayre does not sufficiently emphasize the elemental fact of the disjointed pattern of an adventurer's life, where happenstance introduces an uncontrollable relativity into the judgments of history. Because T. E. Lawrence, thanks to the technique of guerilla warfare, survived his battles on behalf of the desert Arabs against the Turkish Empire, in the eyes of posterity he remained an adventurer. Lord Byron, unwisely choosing to participate in a fixed battle against the same Turks, for the cause of Greek independence, perished, achieving apotheosis as a military hero.

To move from a synchronic to a diachronic perspective, note that Venayre's opening remarks slyly accuse the great Lucien Febvre of the historian's "mortal sin," psychological anachronism. He claims that Febvre explains the desire for adventure as a reaction to Neolithic *sédentarisation*, to the shift from a hunter-gatherer to a farming and pastoral society (p. 12-13). But Venayre's further remarks suggest that he is committing a second mortal sin for an historian: positing a dialectic ghost in the machine of historical process. Its synthesis, Venayre implies, would be the treatment of adventurers by serious, scientific historians. Some legends would be debunked, and others at least partially affirmed. Unfortunately for the cause of clarity, "scientific" in this context is just a metaphor.

Presumably, such research would involve "hard scholarship" such as that of the Annales School—discovery of and research into original documents, and the confrontation of these documents with each other and with other sources of historical knowledge (such as archeology), in order to try to learn what happened in the past, and why. In the event, the synthesis never materializes, nor does Venayre explain in detail how it would. He has an alert, interesting mind, but his exposition fragments into a series of biographical sketches of various adventurers on the one hand, and summaries of various literary works on the other. Today most of the adventurers, with a few notable exceptions such as Lawrence of Arabia or Isabelle Eberhardt, have been forgotten, whereas much adventure literature, such as tales by Conrad, Jack London, Malraux, Saint-Exupéry, and Verne, has remained popular. Venayre briefly mentions whether these authors appear, overtly or disguised, in their own novels of adventure, and whether or not they played any significant role in history. (Hemmingway should have been added—he was quite popular in France.)

Venayre contributes significantly to literary studies through his discussions of the major but relatively neglected German author Ernst Jünger. He appropriately acknowledges the importance of Chateaubriand's novels and epic (*Les Natchez*) set in North America. He usefully distinguishes between land-based and maritime adventure novels (p. 40), although he unduly passes over Hugo's *Travailleurs de la mer*. He contributes substantially to the history of popular culture by illuminating the career of minor adventure writers who were enormously popular in their day, notably Gustave Aimard (pseud. for Olivier Gloux) and Joseph Kessel. However, although he handsomely acknowledges James Fennimore Cooper's influence in France (pp. 39-40, 150), he does not seem aware that during several years in the 1860s, Cooper outsold all French adventure novelists in France—a fact that should have led to a more detailed examination of Cooper's influence, which was quite strong earlier, in Balzac.

His specific examples from other literature often do not conform to his own definitions: Balzac's *Les Chouans* is an epic of the Royalist counterrevolution in Brittany; his *Duchesse de Langeais* focuses on an assault on an almost impenetrable convent, in order to abduct one of the nuns; Dumas's *Comte de Monte-Cristo*, swashbuckling, to be sure, is primarily a great revenge novel (pp. 39-40). Venayre does amusingly characterize the exaggerated dangers of the Latin American wilderness as portrayed in nineteenth-century fiction (pp. 51-55). In chapters one and three particularly, he revives the stories of many secondary adventurer figures. One major omission is the colorful Richard Francis Burton, who knew several Indian languages, and learned Arabic and Islamic customs so well that he was able to complete a pilgrimage to Mecca undetected in 1853. Overall, Venayre makes one aware of the immense prominence of Anglo-Saxon writers, explorers, and would-be conquerors as contributors to the mystique of adventurism in French popular culture.

Chapter two, "L'horizon pédagogique" (pp. 61-99) offers mildly interesting general remarks on the tradition of teaching the young while entertaining them with fictional adventures and with life in the outdoors. Baden-Powell's scouting movement began in 1908. Venayre appears more familiar with the 20th century than the 19th, which he treats doggedly, but without flair. In the next three chapters, his book hits its stride. Chapter three, "L'Invention de l'aventure moderne," opens by describing a shift of emphasis from the content of adventures (war, political intrigue, piracy) to the exhilaration of adventuring itself. It begins with an overview of the prolific career of the then-famous, now-forgotten

Henry [Henri] de Monfried, who published twenty volumes of reports of his travels in North Africa during the 1930s, and then proceeds to discuss the Tom Lingard series of novels by Joseph Conrad (*Almayer's Folly*, *The Rescue*, *The Outcast of the Islands*) and those of Malraux up to 1933 (his masterful creation of his own legend deserved more attention). It proceeds to the careers of T. E. Lawrence, Lady Stanhope, and Isabelle Eberhardt. This enumeration of intriguing but disconnected vignettes characterizes the movement of thought throughout the entire volume. Chapter IV, "La Nostalgie de l'espace" (pp. 144-88), explains how from around 1900, the vanishing frontiers inspired French people with the fear that possibilities for adventure were disappearing forever. Venayre, however, should have briefly sketched the main cause of this malaise: the amazing progress of French colonialism between 1880 and 1900, when the European powers divided most of Africa among themselves, drawing national borders without any regard for ethnic rivalries, and when France imposed itself on much of Southeast Asia. During the 1920s and 30s, science fiction and heroic fantasy literature tried to compensate by creating new spaces for adventure (H. G. Wells should have at least been mentioned, and Verne should have received more attention).

Chapter five, "La Poésie en actes" (pp. 189-235) is again a bit of a hodge-podge, skipping from Jack London to Rimbaud to the daring investigative reporter to gold rushes, missionaries, the Foreign Legion, and mail pilots. The final twenty pages, on the psychology of adventurism, are often sensitive and insightful. The final chapter, "L'Idéologie de l'aventure" (pp. 236-80), reprises them, but here and there adds interesting speculative links between the adventurer's ethic of self-affirmation and personal development, and the far-right political movements of France during the Entre-Deux-Guerres. The brief conclusion specifies that a constant in literature about adventure, between 1850-1950, is the representation of remote, wild, unknown lands; that the figure of the Adventurer becomes positive from 1890-1920; and that since 1950, great adventurers are seen to have disappeared after 1940, while decolonization has not been experienced as opening new avenues for adventure.

Admittedly, in judging an *omnium gatherum* such as this book, complaints about what has been unduly omitted or underdeveloped are unfair insofar as the author is subject to the conflicting expectations of completeness, originality, and profundity. The absence of a bibliography, no doubt for reasons of economy, is disappointing, but the good index and the endnotes compensate. The most equitable assessment would be that *La gloire de l'aventure*, a rich, scholarly, but somewhat unfocused work, should interest the cultural historian, but not the historian *per se*.

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