

H-France Review Vol. 16 (July 2016), No. 113

Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Henri Bergson* (edited by Alexandre Lefebvre and Nils F. Schott, translated by Nils F. Schott), Duke University Press, 2015. \$94.95 U.S. (cl.). ISBN 978-0-8223-5916-6; \$26.95 U.S. (pb.). ISBN 978-0-8223-5935-7.

Giuseppe Bianco, Université de Lyon III.

Alexandre Lefebvre, the author of the introduction to the English translation of this work on Bergson, rightly reminds the reader that, during at least twenty years, Anglo-American scholarship on the French philosopher has been dominated by the interpretation of Gilles Deleuze. The author of *Difference and Repetition* brought Bergson into the spotlight after seventy years of being treated, almost completely, like an old “piece of furniture.”[1] Like a seasoned illusionist, Deleuze pulled out of his magic hat *Matter and Memory* and used this forgotten classic as a tool to analyze the seventh art. The success of *The Image-Movement* provoked a new interest in his *Le bergsonisme*, which was then translated in 1988. Because of Deleuze, Bergson entered the pantheon of “French Theory,” the set of texts studied in departments of comparative literature and cultural studies and celebrated by contributors to journals such as *Semiotext(e)*. Since then, his books are both read as philosophical classics and as toolboxes for tackling topics as different as embodiment, digital culture, gender theory, post-colonial politics. This astonishing success inside, but especially outside the discipline of philosophy, reminds one of “Bergson’s glory,” the moment when his name was on everyone’s lips. During the Belle Époque, novelists, symbolist poets, cubist painters, pragmatist philosophers, anarchist trade unionists, right- and left-wing revolutionaries used Bergson’s concepts or claimed to be “Bergsonian.”

The reasons for Bergson’s disappearance after 1930 are many and diverse. His contributions to French war propaganda could not help but irritate those who had survived the horrors of the trenches. His absence from the philosophical debates after the publication of *Duration and Simultaneity* helped his image to fade. The Nobel prize he was awarded “mummified” him. Finally, his conversion to Catholicism provoked the distrust of a new generation of anti-conformist philosophers more interested in Marx than in an author praised by Jacques Chevalier. Caustic pamphlets like *The End of a Philosophical Parade: Bergsonism* (1929) by Georges Politzer or *The Watchdogs* (1932) by his friend Paul Nizan, cleared the road for the more considered critiques by the “existential phenomenologists,” Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. Twenty-five years later, the epistemological conjuncture of the Sixties, characterized by the success of the sciences of man and by the privilege for synchronic analysis over the diachronic, did not favor a philosophy of the intuition of temporal experience. Finally, the philosophy of the “*élan vital*” was unable to make sense of notions like those explored by genetics.[2]

Nonetheless the memory of Bergson survived in the works of many figures who were still attached to Bergson’s concepts, method or style of thinking: Catholic intellectuals like Gabriel Marcel and Emmanuel Mounier, historians of philosophy like Jean Wahl and Emile Bréhier, phenomenologists like Emmanuel Lévinas and Paul Ricoeur, and moral philosophers like René Le Senne and Vladimir Jankélévitch. The peculiar organization of the French educational system, in which philosophy is a mandatory discipline in high school, allowed Bergson’s books to survive. *Time and Free Will*, *Matter and Memory* and *Creative*

Evolution were mentioned in textbooks and they were included in the mandatory readings the students wishing to get the *agrégation*—the diploma required to teach at high school—had to complete. The situation was slightly different in the English-speaking world. The success of analytic philosophy—mindful of the critiques of Bergson by Bertrand Russell and Moritz Schlick—and the almost exclusively phenomenological and hermeneutical references of the rare “continental” philosophy departments, ensured the almost complete disappearance of Bergson.

The sudden appearance and success of *Bergsonism* somehow sideswiped Anglo-American readers. They forgot that Deleuze’s interpretation was just *one* interpretation among others: it depended on the context in which it had been written and on its strategic aims. Deleuze’s Bergson was anti-dialectical, because it was directed against the generation of his Hegelian masters (Kojève and Hyppolite). It was also anti-psychological, anti-phenomenological and even anti-humanist, insofar as it belonged to the epistemological conjuncture determined by Heidegger’s “ontological turn” (the one that followed the *Brief über den Humanismus*) and by structuralist anti-subjectivism (according to Lévi-Strauss, the ultimate goal of the human sciences was not “to constitute, but to dissolve man”). Finally, as Lefebvre rightly observes in his preface, Deleuze’s interpretation was arid and systematic. It consisted, in fact, in the application of Martial Gueroult’s method of synchronic analysis of philosophical “architectures,” proposed by the famous historian of philosophy during the 1950s.

For these reasons the publication of Jankélévitch’s book cannot be but welcomed: it constitutes the proof of the possibility of presenting “another Bergson.” It shows to what extent Bergson’s texts—like *any* philosophical texts—can be twisted in different ways, according to the hermeneutic strategy of the interpreter.[3] Deleuze’s and Jankélévitch’s reciprocal disinterest—at the time when they were colleagues at the Sorbonne, between 1957 and 1960, but also in the ensuing years—was motivated by their profound differences. Deleuze, who grew up during the “Sartrian years,” but who was then fascinated by the breakthrough of the sciences of man, was certainly not interested by Jankélévitch’s moral reflections, and Jankélévitch was extremely suspicious of Deleuze’s serene anti-humanism.

Jankélévitch’s interpretation is, so to speak, subjectivist and existential. It gives a lot of importance to *Time and Free Will*, a book that the structuralist Deleuze considered only for its theory of multiplicities, and to *The Two Sources*, that the author of *Nietzsche and Philosophy* deliberately almost ignored. This *Henri Bergson* focuses on negative phenomena like nostalgia, regret, forgiveness and irreversibility. Deleuze was considering negativity and the effects related to it as the absolute enemies of philosophical thought, insofar as they were “human all too human.” Following the suggestions of Jean Wahl, Jankélévitch also resurrected Bergson’s notion of the instant (which had been lost from the discourse), a temporal dimension that Gaston Bachelard considered to be unexplainable based on the conceptual framework provided by Bergson in his first four books.[4]

Jankélévitch’s interpretation was the result of an attempt to adapt Bergson to a new context, interwar France, in which an allegedly serene philosophy like that presented in *Creative Evolution* looked completely anachronistic. Jankélévitch’s intellectual itinerary can be characterized as a chasm. On the one hand, his interpretation was marked by the subterranean influence of *Lebensphilosophie* (Jankélévitch started working on Georg Simmel), just as he was trying to adapt Bergson to a new readership. On the other hand, Bergsonism provided him with the conceptual framework that made possible the formulation of his personal existential and moral philosophy.

Jankélévitch’s works marked many of his comrades. Through this *Henri Bergson*, Raymond Aron discovered the importance of Bergson’s critique of retrospection, a critique he used in his thesis on *La Philosophie critique de l’histoire*. In Toulouse, during the 1930s, Georges Canguilhem spent hours in discussion with Jankélévitch, a “real Bergsonian, living in the movement,” and it is probably the latter who convinced Canguilhem to change his severe judgements of Bergson, a man his master Alain despised.[5] A few years later, in *The Knowledge of Life*, Canguilhem spoke highly about *Creative Evolution*,

which he considered the first formulation of an organology, a bio-philosophical theory of technology. Merleau-Ponty and Hyppolite as well read Jankélévitch's *Henri Bergson*, the book opening their eyes to the importance of negativity in Bergson's thought. This interpretation laid the conditions for a more thoughtful confrontation between Bergson and the "three Hs." One can find this confrontation at work in books like *The Visible and the Invisible* and *Logic and Existence*.^[6]

Jankélévitch, a militant Bergsonian, wanted to read Bergson "with the whole soul," in a "Bergsonian way," therefore he focused on the supposed "fundamental intuition" behind his writings, and decided to ignore the context in which they had been produced as well as the order of composition (p. 327). He adopted the same approach in his Ph.D. dissertation on Schelling, published in 1932. Despite the beauty and the success of Jankélévitch's book, the epistemological validity of his "method" remains highly questionable. In 1932, in a review of Jankélévitch's *L'Odyssée de la conscience dans la dernière philosophie de Schelling*, Martial Gueroult expressed his appreciation for the book, but judged the method used by his colleague, consisting in analysing Schelling's text "isolated from its context," "outside of its time," as "disconcerting." Jankélévitch's method risked producing "tales," certainly "marvelous," but often "completely arbitrary."^[7] Jankélévitch's intransigent Bergsonism--his faith in intuition and his distrust in contextualization and historical reconstruction--produced his marvelous *Henri Bergson*, but often misled him. In a 1959 interview, translated in the book's appendix, Jankélévitch asserted that the Sartrean concept of existence was an "idea [already] articulated in *Time and Free Will*," that "Bergson was existentialist," that there were many "affinities between Bergson and Kierkegaard" and, finally, that "Husserl's works [...] predate Bergson's works."^[8] These assertions by Jankélévitch were fueled by his resentment of the philosophical community's disinterest in his philosophical father who it had mummified, transformed into a "classic," beginning in the 1940s.^[9] At the same time, Jankélévitch was critical of the existentialists (who were already under the spotlight), and especially of Sartre, for their purely rhetorical engagement during the war.

Opposing, like Jankélévitch did, Sartre's "fake" engagement to Bergson's, who, during World War One, actively contributed to French anti-German brainwashing (or *bourrage de crâne*) was a very clumsy move. Jankélévitch's hard-line Bergsonian militancy was further reinforced by another decision: his refusal to forgive Germany for the horrible crimes committed during World War Two. This decision motivated a philosophical embargo that lasted almost his entire life. Jankélévitch stopped referring to German philosophy--a philosophy that, nonetheless, had influenced his reading of Bergson and the evolution of its own reflection. This was one of Jankélévitch's controversial "political" acts.^[10] One may wonder if these acts could be explained by a philosophy which was solely ethical and esthetical, and to a reflection which not only deliberately ignored German philosophy, but was also completely unaware of both "real" politics and of the development of social sciences.^[11]

This *Henri Bergson* is important for one last reason: it is one of the rare writings by Jankélévitch to be translated into English. The reasons for the disinterest among the English-speaking scholarship cannot be examined here, but one of the obstacles that has complicated access to Jankélévitch's complex and unusual conceptual world is certainly his prose. Agreeing to translate Jankélévitch meant accepting a complicated challenge. Without hesitation, we have to compliment Niels F. Schott for his accurate and beautiful translation. The nice preface by Alexandre Lefebvre provides the English reader with all the information he needs to understand this important text.

NOTES

[1] Cf. H. Lefebvre, *La Somme et le reste* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1989), p. 383.

[2] For all these aspects, one could refer to F. Azouvi, *La Gloire de Bergson* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007) and to G. Bianco, *Après Bergson* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2015).

[3] Another example of another interpretation of Bergson is Henri Gouhier's *Bergson et le Christ des Evangiles* (Paris: Vrin, 1961).

[4] Gaston Bachelard, "L'Intuition de l'Instant," *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Etranger* 119/1(1935): 122-123.

[5] G. Canguilhem, "Témoignage de Georges Canguilhem," *Magazine littéraire* 333(1995).

[6] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968); Jean Hyppolite, *Logic and Existence* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1997).

[7] M. Gueroult, "L'Odyssée de la conscience dans la dernière philosophie de Schelling d'après M. Jankélévitch," *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 42/1(1935): 77-105, 92.

[8] For an accurate study on the influence of Bergson on German philosophy, see C. Zanfi, *Bergson et la philosophie allemande: 1907-1932* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2013), p. 258.

[9] See V. Jankélévitch, "Henri Bergson," *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 56(1951): 1.

[10] See the recent collection of Jankélévitch's political texts: Françoise Schwab, Jean-Marie Brohm and Jean-François Rey, eds., *Vladimir Jankélévitch, L'esprit de résistance. Textes inédits. 1943-1983* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2015).

[11] Jacques Madeule writes that Jankélévitch "spent his own life between his library..., his desk... and his piano." (J. Madeule, "Vladimir Jankélévitch", in Monique Bassett et al, *Ecrits pour Vladimir Jankélévitch* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978), p. 18; translation by G. Bianco).

Giuseppe Bianco
Université de Lyon III
bepz@libero.it

Copyright © 2016 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172