

H-France Review Vol. 17 (August 2017), No. 143

Hélène Baty-Delalande and Jean-François Massol, eds., *Jean Barois, centenaire d'un roman-monstre : Lectures à vif, lectures actuelles*. Bern and New York: Peter Lang, 2017. 208 pp. €65.95 (pb). ISBN 978-3-0343-2141-9

Review by Robert D. Priest, Royal Holloway, University of London.

Published in November 1913, Roger Martin du Gard's breakout novel *Jean Barois* feels at once precocious and belated. Its plot is rooted in the conflicts and preoccupations of the turn of the century—especially the Dreyfus Affair—but these were on the brink of being swept away in the maelstrom of the First World War. Like a book out of the 1880s, *Jean Barois* orbits around its protagonist's spiritual crisis, tracking his shift away from childhood Catholicism and towards free-thought. Yet, showing its roots in the early twentieth-century Catholic revival among French intellectuals most famously diagnosed by Frédéric Gugelot, the book's denouement witnesses Barois returning to Catholicism. [1] Such ambivalence colours not only the book's content, but also its form. Martin du Gard wrote the book in chapters that amount to theatrical dialogues, occasionally interspersed with epistolary interludes, while the section on the Dreyfus Affair is for long stretches a montage of speeches, documents and newspaper clippings that are sometimes fictional, since the central characters write for a fictional paper called *Le Semeur*, and at other times real, such as Zola's 'J'Accuse!'. This experimentation points the way forward to the literary world of the twenties and thirties, yet there remains a conservatism to Martin du Gard's technique. All such citations and excerpts are integrated into the realist tradition of the narrative novel, with consistent typefaces and clear quotation marks rather than visually striking montage.

Such ambiguities and ambivalences form the central theme of this concise yet rewarding collection, which emerged from a workshop held at Grenoble in 2013 (hence the now slightly awkward "centenary" of the title). As Hélène Baty-Delalande and Jean-François Massol argue in the introduction, it is more productive to explore the novel's "étrange double visage" (p. 14) than simply dismiss it as an experimental dead-end. While the first part—"Jean Barois, entre totalité et fragmentation"—consists of seven critical essays by contemporary critics treating its stylistic and narrative innovations, the second part—"Autour de *Jean Barois*, 1913-1914"—provides not only a critical essay on the book's immediate reception but also a very useful collection of long excerpts from four letters to Martin du Gard and twelve reviews from the contemporary press. This bipartite structure has two key advantages. Firstly, it allows the reader to juxtapose the preoccupations of today's scholars with those of contemporary audiences. Secondly, it makes the volume very versatile for classroom use, allowing students to investigate the book's reception without tracking down obscure periodicals from the 1910s.

In the first essay, Aude Leblond confronts the "bifurcation générique" of Martin du Gard's text. By the novelist's own account in a letter of 1911, he wanted to transfer "l'optique de la scène" to "l'optique du livre" (p. 19). The technique he adopted in practice was to treat each chapter like a theatrical scene, with narrative taking the place of stage directions. Leblond also suggests that Martin du Gard treated each chapter as a stage in a more metaphorical sense: "c'est un espace de confrontation argumentative—espace où il fait appel au jugement du lecteur" (p. 25). While it would have been interesting to explore more how

Martin du Gard's appropriation of theatrical dialogue operated within the specific context of dramatic experimentation around 1913, Leblond does a good job teasing out the implications of Martin du Gard's technique for how readers interact with his novel. Sustaining this attention to structure, Hélène Baty-Delalande argues that *Jean Barois* is a "roman des passages" whose fragmentary quality serves as an implicit critique of all totalising visions of existence. Baty-Delalande diagnoses three major forms of segmentation that disrupt the novel: typographic, structural, and generic. Perhaps the most suggestive claim here is that, while it would be wrong to call it Bergsonian, Martin du Gard's experiments with rhythm situate the book firmly in "le moment 1900 de la philosophie" (p. 38). There are some resonances here with Jean-François Massol's extended comparison of *Jean Barois* with Martin du Gard's posthumously published *Maumort*. Massol particularly wishes to stress the continuity of fragmentary forms and generic mixing across Martin du Gard's oeuvre, and offers a precise chronological breakdown of the process of drafting *Maumort* which will be of particular use to scholars of the latter text (pp. 56-7).

The following two chapters take a more contextualist approach and, if only due to my historian's taste, struck me as the most interesting in the first section. First, Charlotte Andrieux situates *Jean Barois* firmly in the context of practices of literary and artistic collage in the early twentieth century, alongside Breton, Éluard, Apollinaire, Aragon, Dos Passos, and others. Despite the fragmentary quality of Martin du Gard's novel, Andrieux argues, it is almost never cited in the literature on collage. Through rich yet concise comparisons of Martin du Gard's method with that of the cubists, surrealists, and others, Andrieux draws out its function of creating "une esthétique de l'inachèvement" (p. 82) which draws the reader away from a univocal perspective on the text. The chapter is helpfully supplemented with illustrations (pp. 83-9). In the following chapter, Stéphanie Smadja roots the novel in the "période charnière" (p. 91) of French prose in 1913. Smadja argues that during these years French writers and critics were particularly depressed about France's ability to produce *romanciers* rather than *prosateurs*. Smadja's arguments are bolstered by numerous evocative quotations from Gide and others, and explore the incorporation of spoken voice and the role of genre alongside other subjects. Of particular value are Smadja's reflections on how *Jean Barois* uses theatrical dialogue to explore subjectivity. This is, after all, a curious decision: "Dans un roman dont l'objectif est de raconter une vie de la conscience, la vie intérieure n'est retracé que sous forme extériorisée" (p. 102). Situating Martin du Gard's prose in the context of French prose in the 1910s helps us to understand this.

Stéphanie Bertrand's chapter looks in close detail at Martin du Gard's use of aphorisms, including the Abbé Joziers' memorable dismissal of free-thinkers: "Penser librement ! Mais les fous seuls pensent librement" (p. 109). Bertrand argues that aphorisms hold particular interest in a novel defined by fragmentation, and argues that above all they serve as a way of posing the book's fundamental question: "comment l'homme peut-il construire une parole de vérité ?" (p. 124). This question resonates with the final critical essay, where Àngels Santa explores the question of religion which is central to the novel. In addition to useful biographical detail on Martin du Gard's own relation to the Catholic milieu, Santa provides a clear exposition of Barois' developing views on science, religion, atheism, and so on. Santa particularly accents the partiality of the representation of both Catholicism and anticlericalism in the novel. What emerges is the picture of a novel whose somewhat contradictory approach to religion—symbolised by Barois' somewhat indecipherable reconversion—feels rather symptomatic of a seam of liberal thought in the early Third Republic which was uncomfortable with both Catholic orthodoxy and the extremes of Combesian anticlericalism.

The second half of the volume moves on to explore *Jean Barois*' contemporary reception.

Hélène Baty-Delalande's introductory essay here explores reviews from across the period November 1913-July 1914 in combination with a small sample of letters received by Martin du Gard. The study is rigorous, providing a detailed list of the major writers and reviews that responded to *Jean Barois*. Baty-Delalande argues that the reception of *Jean Barois* "témoigne d'un certain état de la pensée du roman, en France, et d'un horizon d'attente des lecteurs : l'émotion s'origine dans la réalité vécue ; l'individu se

constitue dans le rapport à la foule ; l'histoire s'écrit sous le signe du drame collectif" (p. 170). She signals a few major trends in the contemporary reception. The book was most often described as the "histoire d'une generation" (p. 152) or similar formulas, rather than simply as a character study of the eponymous Barois. Although critics recognised the Dreyfus Affair as the central drama of the book, they tended to subordinate this to the religious question. Despite the novel's ambivalent conclusion, its biggest fans tended to have "une sensibilité laïque et dreyfusarde" (p. 169).

One of Baty-Delalande's most interesting discoveries is that while critics' lingering memories (and resentments) from the 1890s and 1900s palpably shaped their reception of its narrative--Clemenceau's journal was, for example, keen to correct certain inaccuracies surrounding Dreyfus--they did not treat the publication of *Jean Barois* as an occasion to rehash the Affair. Rather, they firmly inscribed the book within immediately contemporary debates over the position of French youth--epitomised by the Agathon study of "les jeunes gens d'aujourd'hui" which had been published in 1911--and respiritualisation--embodied in the figure of Charles Péguy who had converted to Catholicism in 1906.[2] But such critics did not read *Jean Barois* as a *roman à these*; rather like today's critics, they were instead interested in its ambiguities, and unsure of Martin du Gard's true feelings.

The extracts from the press and correspondence which conclude the book help flesh out Baty-Delalande's classifications and arguments. While Agathon themselves thought that Martin du Gard had not fully grasped the nationalist motivations of the new youth (pp. 195-6), Henri Bachelin noted the book's formal experimentation: "je fus tenté de saluer avec ironie l'introduction du cinématographe dans le roman" (p. 202). Even *Jean Barois*' most sceptical critics conceded that it had a profound emotional power. Interested readers will gain much from carrying out their own explorations in this broad range of primary material.

Eugen Weber once called Martin du Gard's novel "an essential document for the student of the new atmosphere" of French culture in the year before 1914: "Open *Jean Barois* anywhere and you will find a running chronicle of contemporary intellectual attitudes." [3] As this small but well-formed volume clearly shows, such certainly seems to have been the position, or at least the yardstick, taken up by its first critics. There are certain blind-spots to this collection, of which the most notable is gender. Despite the voluminous historical attention paid to problems of masculinity in the fin-de-siècle French debates which are so central to the worlds both portrayed and entered by *Jean Barois*, this was particularly noticeable. [4] Nonetheless, the essays and materials presented here help turn our attention back to one of the many interesting awkward children of the early Third Republic, and will hopefully provoke further consideration from both literary scholars and historians of the period.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Aude Leblond, "L'optique du livre contre l'optique de la scène : chapitrage et bifurcation générique dans *Jean Barois*"

Hélène Baty-Delalande, "*Jean Barois*, roman des passages"

Jean-François Massol, "Morcellement, unité, variété : *Jean Barois* et « Maumort », deux romans symétriques dans l'œuvre complète de Roger Martin du Gard"

Charlotte Andrieux, "Le collage des documents dans *Jean Barois* : une approche littéraire et picturale moderne"

Stéphanie Smadja, "*Jean Barois* dans l'histoire de la prose"

Stéphanie Bertrand, "Modalités et enjeux de la forme aphoristique dans *Jean Barois* : un fragment totalitaire?"

Àngels Santa, "Utilisation du sentiment religieux dans la construction du « chantier » littéraire de Jean Barois"

Hélène Baty-Delalande, "La réception critique de *Jean Barois* : modernité d'un roman-monstre ?"

NOTES

[1] Frédéric Gugelot, *La conversion des intellectuels au catholicisme en France 1885-1935* (Paris: CNRS, 1998).

[2] A useful abridged English translation is available as Henri Massis and Alfred de Tarde, "The Young People of Today," in John W. Boyer and Jan Goldstein, eds., *The University of Chicago Readings in Western Civilization 9: Twentieth Century Europe* (Chicago, Ill.: Chicago University Press, 1987), pp. 16-35.

[3] Eugen Weber, *My France: Politics, Culture, Myth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 198.

[4] To pick just two vital studies: Christopher Forth, *The Dreyfus Affair and the Crisis of French Manhood* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Judith Surkis, *Sexing the Citizen: Masculinity and Morality in France, 1870-1920* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

Robert D. Priest
Royal Holloway, University of London
robert.priest@rhul.ac.uk

Copyright © 2017 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 republication 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