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Mobilities unhinged

Pierre Souvestre and Marcel Allain, *Le Rour* (*L'auto*, Jan. 11th-March 31st 1909; repr., Paris: Libraire de l'Auto, 1909; repr., Paris: Union Général d'Éditions, 1974), 437 pp., around 10\$ on online second-hand bookstores.

Pierre Souvestre and Marcel Allain are well known to be the creators of Fantômas, one of the most popular evil geniuses of the French culture. But they are also the authors of a novel that precedes the Fantômas series and is built around mobilities and modes of transport: *Le Rour*. This review makes the case that this novel could participate in understanding the way in which mobilities are narrated in the pre-WWI France.

The importance of mobility in the novel likely stems from Pierre Souvestre's passion for the automobile and motoring. After starting in France a literary and journalistic career, he opened a car garage in Liverpool in 1898, organized races and wrote about them in the press (Lacassin 1974, 15)ⁱ. On his return to France, he continued writing articles and short stories, often with a sporting theme, for a vast array of newspapers. He published a *History of the Automobile* in 1907 and edited a monthly magazine: *Le Poids Lourd* (*Ibid.*, 16-18). This is the context in which appears Marcel Allain: first Souvestre's ghostwriter, he rapidly became a journalist at *Le Poids Lourd*, and then its subeditor (*ibid.*).

Accustomed to collaborating, Souvestre and Allain responded in 1909 to a commission from the daily newspaper *L'Auto* (the forerunner of today's *L'Équipe*), which was seeking to 'fill the void left in [its] columns [...] by the termination of an important advertising contract' (*Ibid.*, 21. all translations are mine). Thus, was published, from 11 January to 31 March

1909, *Le Rour*, "grand roman policier et sportif", at a rate of 6 small columns per day (about 20,000 characters) in fifty-four episodesⁱⁱ.

Placed at the heart of the technical transformations of his time, surrounded, within the newspaper, by sports articles and advertisements extolling the merits of engine parts or automobiles, the novel takes an exciting look at the means of transport and communication possible and imagined at the turn of the century.

The title of the book deserves a comment from the outset. Mentioned in the prologue as one of the five "treasures" revealed by an orientalist pastiche of a supra-human prophetic book, the "Rour" is a power to give a form of mechanical-eternal life. But it can also be more prosaically understood as an onomatopoeia that evokes the noise of an engine.

It is indeed the hum of many engines that accompany the reader in this novel of pursuit that merges traits of the 18th century novel of abduction and chase with the colonial adventure novel, the fantastic and science fiction novel, the detective novel, and the French sports novel. This syncretism is particularly visible at the beginning of the story. The sportsman and adventurer Yves d'Arzan Trégoff repairs the carburetor of his car. Mr. and Mrs. de Saint-Édoc enjoy the romantic landscapes of wild Brittany. Meanwhile, Elisabeth de Saint-Édoc disappears from her room, which proves inexplicably locked from the inside. The suspicions that immediately fall on Gurgurha, the ape-man and Yves' servant, cannot fail to give *Le Rour* a flavor reminiscent of both *The Moonstone* and *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*. The resolution of the enigma which relies on the powers of galvanization and electromagnetism is reminiscent of both *Frankenstein* and *Gaspard de la Nuit*.

Between the two *termini* comes the search for Elisabeth and the pursuit of the evil genius that Yves and the investigating judge Fuselier undertake. They ride fast cars that often break down

and slow trains; they chase trains by car and cross paths with tramways and omnibus. They use the telephone and telegram to coordinate and prepare their action. The evil genius is by far better equipped: his strange spider-like car seems to be powered neither by an internal combustion engine nor by an electric motor. Apart from this car, he also uses a submarine, an airplane, and even an exoskeleton that gives him mechanical wings and long stilts to jump around and take off.

These spooky actions and props put at a humorous distance allow the reader to discern several points of interest. First, the novel elaborately describes how the characters are sensitive to proprioception. It shows the importance of a kinesthetic approachⁱⁱⁱ in describing the phenomena of mobilities. Chapter IV, for example, tells of Elizabeth's awakening shortly after her abduction. Locked in a dark room, she is reduced to her *sensation de sentir*, the feel that she exists. She gradually realizes that she is in a cell that seems to move. She then tries to synthesize her sensory perceptions to understand which vehicle she is in according to the type of movement she feels. As for her lover, Yves, his driving expresses his thoughts and emotions, so that the romantic motif of the landscape as a state of mind is transformed here into *driving as a state of mind*: passionate when he “pierces the night” at full speed in pursuit of the kidnapper, he drives as slowly and nonchalantly as he has, later in the novel, given up all hope of finding Elisabeth.

Secondly, the novel shares with other turn-of-the-century and interwar novels the desire to make comparative experiences of movement. Thus, coexisting means of transport are made to compete to measure their respective performances, but also to understand the experiences of the world they allow. The novel as a whole pits human and the machine, the automobile and the train against each other, as Alfred Jarry does in *Le surmâle* (1902), Henri de Régner in *Le*

passé vivant (1905) and *Le Divertissement Provincial* (1925), or Pierre Frondaie in *L'Homme à l'Hispano* (1925).

Le Rour is therefore a fascinating novel which bears witness to the coexistence of speeds and mobilities characteristic of this regime of mobilities which was born with the railways and which died out in France after the Second World War, with the total disappearance of the horse-drawn car and the rise of the automobile. The novel expresses in a paroxysmal form the transformations at work in the space-time continuum and the idea that the place of the human being in the world is linked to his ability to move around and to master the means of communication and transportation at his disposal.

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ⁱ Preface of Francis Lacassin to his edition of the novel: Pierre Souvestre and Marcel Allain, *Le Rour* (Paris: Union Général d'Éditions, 1974).

ⁱⁱ It is possible to read *Le Rour* as it was first published in *L'Auto* starting from the January 11th issue thanks to Gallica.bnf.fr: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k4624016w>. There is one episode per day on page 3 or 4 with few exceptions.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Peter Merriman and Lynne Pearce, “Mobility and the humanities”, *Mobilities*, 12:4 (2017), 493-508, DOI: 10.1080/17450101.2017.1330853.