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The Second World War Seen From the Balcony. Representations of the Spectacle of War in the French Post-War Novel

Clément Sigalas

“Fields of Action, Fields of Vision”: the subtitle of this publication, if related to the French writings about World War II published between 1945 and the late 1950’s, asks you to distinguish two main *corpora*. On the one hand, “narratives of Action” focus on war episodes: great military battles, sabotages by the *Maquis*, air fights, escapes, and so on. These were the bestsellers of that time, particularly Colonel Rémy’s *Mémoires d’un agent secret de la France libre* (1945), General Giraud’s *Mes évasions* (1946) and Royal Air Force pilot Jacques Clostermann’s *Le Grand Cirque* (1948), one of the four best-selling books in France in 1961.¹ Their authors, all members of the French Resistance, found themselves in the heart of the war and then wrote what can be called the epic of the French Resistance, celebrating courage and brotherhood.

On the other hand, “narratives of Vision” give an account of a war experienced indirectly rather than in harsh reality. In these, one is able to gaze at the war or to hear it without being directly struck by it. These narratives, mainly novels, emphasise the distance separating the spectator from the spectacle and highlight the mediating function of the act of looking. Between the subject and the real there are always harmless intermediaries – at least, less violent than gun fire – that tend to have a “derealising” effect: resistance graffiti or posters, maps, newspapers, radio, windows or balconies.

The balcony then, which gives its name to one of the best French novels about war, *Un balcon en forêt*, turns out to be the metaphor of a peculiar way of apprehending this conflict: perceiving it at a distance, converting violence into a spectacle – in keeping with the theatrical specialist sense of the word ‘balcony’. I would like to examine and question this mediated representation of war in order to outline its political implications.

¹ “Les best sellers du siècle”, *Bulletin du livre*, 65 (October 1961), 32-34.

The corpus of the “indirect war” is quite extensive.² Consequently I will have to restrict my study to six novels I consider representative of the whole. Four of them were awarded the Goncourt Prize: Jean-Louis Bory’s *Mon village à l’heure allemande* (1945), Jean-Louis Curtis’ *Les Forêts de la nuit* (1947), Béatrix Beck’s *Léon Morin, prêtre* (1952) and Pierre Gascar’s *Le Temps des morts* (1953). The last two are *La Grande Éclipse* (1952), a forgotten and underrated novel by Alain Bosquet, and Julien Gracq’s masterpiece *Un balcon en forêt* (1958).³

All of these novels emphasise the pre-eminence of signs in the characters’ perception of the conflict: I will first observe how these innocuous signs prevail over actual violence. I will then consider how often war episodes are depicted as spectacular – in the sense of ‘artificial’ rather than ‘impressive’ – events. The protagonists often seem to watch a show instead of being actors in History. This may account for the feeling of strangeness, even guilt, experienced by those who did not *act*, but merely *watched* the war. In this case, the spectator on his balcony may stand for a people which missed out on the war, contrary to the mythology of the whole of France rising up against the enemy.

The Signs of War

It is a remarkable thing that, in these novels, the characters face the signs of war rather than the effects and manifestations of war – meaning violence, wounds, death. According to the *Trésor de la langue française*, a sign is a material, perceptible object, evoking or representing something else as a substitute.⁴ The six novels display two types of signs, depending on whether they “evoke” or “represent” war. This distinction is closely akin to that made by Oswald Ducrot and Tzvetan Todorov between “symptoms” and “signs” in their strictest sense: symptoms are part of the referent – as fever is part of sickness – while a picture representing a German tank is not part of the real tank (133). As a consequence, softer

² The doctoral thesis I have recently defended, which examines in greater detail the ideas summarized in this article, also deals with such novels as Roger Nimier’s *Les Épées* and *Le Hussard bleu*, Claude Simon’s *La Corde raide* and *La Route des Flandres*, Emmanuel Bove’s war novels (*Le Piège*, *Départ dans la nuit*, *Non-lieu*), Roger Vailland’s *Drôle de jeu*, etc.

³ All these novels, except *La Grande Éclipse*, have been translated into English. See the list in the Works Cited Section. In my text, the page numbers will refer first to the French edition, then to the translated version when available. The quotations from *La Grande Éclipse* and *Mon village à l’heure allemande* have been translated by Catherine Hoffmann, whom I would like to thank warmly.

⁴ “Objet matériel, perceptible, valant pour une chose autre que lui-même qu’il évoque ou représente à titre de substitut” (*Trésor de la langue française informatisé*). My translation.

forms of the war (“symptoms”) and representations of the war (pictures, maps, radio...) have to be distinguished.

In novels portraying life under the Occupation, war appears mostly in softer forms: neither weapons nor blood, but words (posters, graffiti),⁵ symbols (little coffins that Resistance fighters send to the collaborators as a threat)⁶ and looks. These in particular play an important role in *Mon village à l'heure allemande* and *Les Forêts de la nuit*, two quite similar⁷ depictions of everyday life in the occupied zone, staging the destiny of various characters and their contrasted behaviours toward the enemy. The Goncourt Prize they were awarded and their public success may indicate that the indirect war they described looked familiar to many readers. In both novels, looks are substitutes for weapons. The protagonist of this peculiar war – or “phoney war”, if one considers that it did not end with the defeat in June 1940 – in *Mon village à l'heure allemande* is the old maid Miss Vrin, who is asked by the pro-German priest to observe the villagers’ behaviour from her skylight. This elevated position is like a pacific and parodic version of the height from which, in battle paintings, the general takes in the whole battlefield. Hence the martial terminology: “La position est bonne. Une position stratégique.” (49) “This is the correct position : a strategic position ”; “Mademoiselle Vrin, dit-il, il faut continuer votre faction. Vous viendrez au rapport au moment de l’angélus” (71) “Miss Vrin, he said, you must remain on duty. You are to report at angelus time”. This example shows how slight the difference is between war and the parochial quarrels inherited from the French Third Republic, embodied here in the rivalries between the priest and the pro-Resistance primary school teacher. At this point, war seems to be a continuation of the past rather than a disruption, even though this war “by looks” will eventually have serious consequences.

Les Forêts de la nuit stages a similar balance between fairly peaceful appearances and a tragic outcome. In the first chapter, young Francis, one of the few authentic heroes in the novel, helps a Resistance fighter cross the Demarcation Line. Chapter four opens with a look which will have considerable repercussions on the plot: “Mme Costellot, une cigarette aux doigts, regardait à travers la vitre, dans la rue calme et grise. — Tiens, remarqua-t-elle, le

⁵ Bory 22, 46, 201, 202, 273; Curtis 171.

⁶ Bory 226; Curtis 357.

⁷ They are similar in their viewpoint: both novels are set in a typical French village or town and intend to give an image of France as a whole during the war. Nevertheless, Curtis’s novel is far more pessimistic and darker than Bory’s.

petit Balansun a dû passer la ligne une fois de plus” (33) “Mme Costellot, smoking a cigarette, was watching the quiet gray street through the windowpane. ‘There,’ she said, ‘the Balansun boy must have crossed the line again” (*Forests of the Night* 23). The spatial organisation is typical of many novels about the Occupation: outside is the war (in this case, an action defying German laws); inside are peaceful signs (a conversation, an armchair, a cigarette); in the middle stands the window, with its ambivalent place and function. The window simultaneously gives Mme Costellot the power to see and know – it gives her power in itself – and allows her an indirect, even peaceful relation to war. On the one hand, she uses it as a spy or soldier would use a weapon – hence the same military metaphors as in *Mon village à l’heure allemande*.⁸ On the other hand, the window acts as a screen, shields the one who looks through it, and leaves no stain either on the hands or on the conscience: the Gestapo, not Mme Costellot, will murder Francis.⁹

Just as fever is part of sickness, looks are part of war, but they are still “symptoms”: apparently innocuous signs hardly referring to a reality which is both tragic and faraway. The second type of signs Ducrot and Todorov evoke, which they consider signs in the strictest sense, are totally cut off from their referent, that is to say, from the reality they are supposed to refer to. In these novels, they are pictorial, photographic and radio representations. The definition the two linguists give is very helpful to this study: “Le signe est à la fois marque et manque: originellement double” (133); “The sign is both a mark and an absence: therefore intrinsically dual”.¹⁰ In fact, novels about the Occupation and the Phoney War are based on this duality. Their characters watch the war, listen to it, but do not feel it; neither are they affected by it.

The treatment of the radio illustrates this ambiguity. Everyone knows about the important role the radio played in the Allied victory, from the appeal of 18 June 1940, to the famous poem by Verlaine giving the signal for the Normandy landing. However, in such novels as *Mon village à l’heure allemande*, the radio mostly reveals the absence of war rather than its mark. Far from being an instrument of war, the news broadcast is the only indication of fights occurring somewhere in the world – but not *here*, to be sure. Only in May 1944 does

⁸ For example, the keyhole through which Mme Costellot’s servant Berthe spies on her employer is called a “poste d’observation” (261) (“observation post”, 188).

⁹ In the plot, she informs the Germans about Francis, yet without knowing this will lead to his death.

¹⁰ My translation.

the war news begin to pose a significant threat to the villagers, when a presenter mentions the village of Jumainville:

Dans presque toutes mes cuisines, on a fait: hein! oh! ah! non? On a regardé le poste avec un effroi incrédule; brusquement, il prenait une *réalité* menaçante parce qu'il parlait pour la première fois de quelque chose que l'on connaissait bien. Tant que cette boîte nommait Stalingrad, Tunis ou Cassino, la T.S.F. n'était qu'une belle invention, et le village était *loin de la guerre*, et Londres était à plusieurs centaines de kilomètres. Mais voilà qu'à Londres on parlait de Jumainville!¹¹ (202-203)

In almost all my kitchens, people went "what! oh! no! They watched the radio with fright and incredulity; suddenly, it took on a threatening reality because for the first time it was talking of something familiar. As long as that box mentioned Stalingrad, Tunis or Cassino, the wireless was nothing but a nice invention, and the village was a long way from the war, and London was miles away. But now, in London, they were talking about Jumainville.

Up to the eve of the Normandy landing, the radio has referred to nothing "real" nor warlike: it was "a nice invention", a means of entertainment allowing the villagers to keep the war away.

Even soldiers of the Phoney War can hardly face the reality of war. In *Un balcon en forêt*, the garrison listens to "the Stuttgart Traitor", a famous French presenter working for the enemy and broadcasting propaganda against France: "Après un long grésillement, toute l'irréalité de la guerre fusait à travers le brouillage avec cette voix mince et acide, qui prenait les temps de ses répliques comme un *troisième couteau*" (37). "After a long sputtering, all the war's unreality melted through the static into this thin, piercing voice, which lingered over its words, hissing like the villain of a melodrama" (28). Since a "troisième couteau" refers to a (ham) actor and "réplique" means both "reply" and "line" in the theatrical sense, the war sounds as unreal as a bad play. Moreover, insisting on the "long sputtering", the novel stresses what separates the listener from the enemy, thus from the battle.

Similarly, the Phoney War seems unreal to the protagonist of *La Grande Éclipse*, by Alain Bosquet. On 10 May 1944, while the German troops are launching their attack in the

¹¹ Emphasis added. The village is speaking, like a human being.

Ardennes, André Bénévent is in the Alps, at a considerable distance from the fighting: “Le soir, c’était *La Pétanque*, les dés, le pernod, parfois les cartes, parfois les liqueurs, le tout interrompu de nouvelles à la radio: l’ennemi avançait.” (42) “In the evening, at *La Pétanque*, there were dice games, *pernod*, sometimes card games, sometimes liqueurs, with occasional interruption by radio news: the enemy was advancing.” The novel focuses on a peaceful place, the café “La Pétanque”, very similar to the aptly-named “Café de la Paix” in *Mon village à l’heure allemande*. As long as the characters listen to the radio, they need not be scared of the fighting. What they learn from the radio is not so much how far the Germans have advanced as how far the war still is from them.

In *Un balcon en forêt*, the radio is but one of the many intermediaries between the war and the character. Others include maps:

Il allait parfois jeter un coup d’œil sur la carte de Belgique épinglée à la tête de son lit – un *supplément gratuit* en couleurs du “Petit Ardennais” entouré de sa frange de drapeaux français, allemands et belges, à découper, le moment venu, pour usage, suivant le pointillé. (127)

He would glance at the map of Belgium tacked over his bed – compliments of the *Petit Ardennais* – printed in three colors and surrounded by a fringe of French, German and Belgian flags with perforated outlines, to be used at the appropriate moment for marking the fronts. (104)

The map should help lieutenant Grange have a global view of the operating forces. Instead, the light is shed not on the referent, but on the signs, on the materiality of the medium; in other words, not on the real, but on an abstract representation of it. The war seems to be a puzzle for children to solve – only children can discover with such pleasure that the supplement is free and in colour... The upcoming tragedy has turned into a play activity. Besides maps, Grange looks at photos of German blockhouses:

L’ensemble, fait de feuilles libres sur papier glacé, encartées dans une couverture, avec les mensurations des ouvrages et des numéros de référence, évoquait la présentation soignée des collections de printemps que vous propose un tailleur. (47)

The whole thing, consisting of loose-leaf sheets of glossy paper in a ringed notebook, with measurements of the structures and reference numbers, reminded him of the careful presentation of spring collections at a tailor's shop. (36)

The verb “paraissaient” operates several transfers. Firstly, from pragmatic to aesthetic considerations: signs of the war do not arouse fear, but a certain pleasure experienced while contemplating beauty. Secondly, from masculinity to femininity: while the army is traditionally considered to be a man's world, fashion vocabulary and terms like “measurement” connote femininity, suggesting sartorial rather than military preoccupations... Lastly, from reality to its artistic representation: once again, the emphasis is put not on the real, but on the medium (sheets, paper). Described elsewhere as “baroque” and “theatrical”, war has become a spectacle.

The Spectacle of War

All these novels show a spatial organisation that is characteristic of any spectacle: on the one hand, a spectator whose position at a distance is emphasized; on the other hand, events turning into a spectacle and seeming unreal to their witnesses. What we will see now is that such a spatial organisation makes the spectacle either enigmatic or pleasant, but by no means traumatic.

As many critics have commented, viewpoints play a crucial role in Julien Gracq's works. In this respect, there is, however, a striking discrepancy between *Un balcon en forêt* and *Le Rivage des Syrtes*. In the latter, the setting is a desert plain, marked by the absence of any visible sign, which, according to Michel Collot, stimulates the characters' imagination (112). On the contrary, Gracq's next novel, as its title implies, is set in the forest. The screen of trees, a widely used metaphor in the novel, abounds in signs. That is why Grange spends his time on the watch. In *Un balcon en forêt*, the paradigmatic sequence is a two-step process: firstly, identifying the viewpoint; then, describing the spectacle. By foregrounding the viewpoint, this type of sequence emphasizes the distance between the spectator and the spectacle, between the warrior-in-waiting and the war. Now, what can Grange see from his balcony – “balcony” serving as a generic term for any viewpoint –? One night, through a wide-open skylight, he can observe “un clin d'œil sec et isolé” (195) (“a quick, isolated flash”, 164) and “un point de feu minuscule et très clair” (196) (“a tiny, very distinct point of

light”, 164). The day after, he is watching through “a gun sight”: “Un mince tiret tremblé, dessiné par une cursive agile, enjamba la laie blanche, se perdit dans la marge d’herbe: une martre.” (230) “A thin hyphen drawn by an agile, cursive hand, crossed the white road and disappeared into the grass: a marten” (195). In brief, Grange can never see warlike signs (bombings, planes...), but telegraphic and graphic ones (flashes, points, hyphens, handwriting, and the metaphor of the “margin” in the French version). For the observers, war is but an indecipherable text.

Similarly, in Béatrix Beck’s novel *Léon Morin, prêtre*, watching the war does in no way lead to a global comprehension of it. The end of Chapter Two is a good illustration of this. It consists of five strange “scenes” which are five visions recounted by the narrator from the position of a spectator. The last one looks like a hallucination:

Un soldat allemand courait vers une petite troupe de ses compagnons. À une certaine distance en arrière, un jeune civil courait plus vite encore. Il rejoignit le soldat et tous deux, côte à côte, à une allure de forcenés, atteignirent la troupe. Aussitôt, avec une rapidité et une précision d’automates, le soldat qui arrivait, et un autre, martelèrent de coups de poing redoublés le visage et la tête du civil. Il s’écroula. Toujours avec une célérité et une coordination de mouvements hallucinantes, deux autres soldats le relevèrent. Ils semblaient spécialisés dans chacun de leurs gestes. Tenant l’adolescent sous les aisselles, ils le portèrent verticalement, sans que ces pieds touchassent terre. Sa tête pendait sur sa poitrine. Je me demandai s’il était mort. Le peloton s’éloigna au pas cadencé.

Cette scène demeura pour moi ineffaçable et incompréhensible. (42)

A German soldier was running toward a little group of his fellows. Some distance behind him ran a young civilian, going even faster. He caught up with the soldier and the two ran on, side by side, in a sort of frenzy, until they had reached the others. Immediately, and with the speed and the precision of robots, the soldier who had been running and another soldier began to rain down blows with their fists upon the head and face of the civilian. He collapsed. Still with a speed and co-ordination that seemed a delusion, two other soldiers picked him up. Each gesture was that of an expert. Holding the adolescent by his armpits, they carried him in a vertical position without his feet

touching the ground. His head hung down on his chest. I wondered if he was dead. The group of soldiers marched off, in step.

This scene remained, for me, unforgettable and incomprehensible. (35)

The spectator – she refers to a “scene” – seems to have witnessed the event as if in a dream state. The description combines precise elements (the participants and their coordinated movements as a well-oiled machine) with very vague ones (“some distance behind”). It lacks explicit spatial and temporal markers, especially because this passage, like the four previous ones, is surrounded with blanks. This raises the question of where and when this event occurred, even whether it really occurred that way. As in dreams, logic and will no longer prevail: the unit the first warrior and the civilian seemed to form suddenly breaks, for no apparent reason, and all the characters act as automatons. As in Gracq’s novel, the spectator, because of her position at a distance, cannot understand the signs and remains excluded from the experience of war.

When not incomprehensible, the war can turn into a pleasant spectacle. It would be no exaggeration to say that all these novels propose a new reading of Lucretius’ “*Suave mari magno*”, the first two verses of which read as follows: “How lovely it is, when the winds lash the great sea into huge waves that beset sailors, to gaze out from dry land at the tribulations of others.” (Lucretius 48). Originally, this was an allegory for the opposition between the philosopher’s serenity – thanks to his taste for reason and moderation – and the distress of those troubled by passion. Applied to World War Two, it means something very different. The spectator’s calm gaze at the troubled waters indicates either that he is not able to experience the war as such or that he is trying to protect himself by casting doubt on its reality. The spectacle transforms violence into pleasure, as manifested by the depiction of a bombing, in the opening of *La Grande Éclipse*:

Le bruit procura une grande joie au jeune homme, qui s’accouda à la fenêtre, se demandant si une deuxième bombe allait suivre la première. Un avion s’abattit tout à coup. Cette masse qui tourbillonnait dans l’air et lâchait une fumée épaisse donnait à Bénévent la sensation d’assister à un spectacle grandiose. (9-10)

The noise filled the young man with a great joy. He leaned on the window, wondering if a second bomb would follow the first. Suddenly a plane crashed. This swirling mass filling the air with thick smoke gave Bénévent the impression that he was attending a gorgeous spectacle.

This passage contains all the characteristics found in Lucretius' poem: a viewpoint (the window), a disaster turned into a spectacle due to the distance, and the happiness one experiences when seeing danger and yet escaping it. Exactly the same features appear in *Léon Morin, prêtre* when the narrator observes from her balcony "comets, bloody bouquets, fiery roses, whips, snakes of lightning, flaming horns of plenty, paroxysms of light".¹² (34) From the balcony, overlooking the mountains instead of the forest, bombings metamorphose into "fireworks", and fear into elation. Metaphors and comparisons relating to flowers ("bouquets") and animals ("snakes") mitigate violence. Another widely used metaphor in the novels is that of white flakes, referring to anti-aircraft both in *Mon village à l'heure allemande* ("white flakes of vapour as soft as wads of cottonwool"¹³) and *Un balcon en forêt* ("A languid trail of globular puffs followed behind [the German plane] at some distance, blooming in its wake with a cottony "plop.", 107)¹⁴ Both descriptions use metaphors defined by rhetoric as *in absentia*, which substitute the comparing term (soft material in this case) for the compared idea (the "real" fires, which are totally absent from the text). Again, the view from the window transforms exploding shells into blooming flowers, the war into a "spectacle": "Le spectacle ne parut à Grange nullement guerrier, plutôt ornemental et gracieux". (Gracq 129); "The spectacle seemed not in the least warlike to Grange, but rather ornamental, graceful". (107)

Such an aestheticization of violence leads to its fictionalization. In a study about accounts of shipwrecks in the 16th century, Frank Lestringant considers, as I do, this fictionalisation to be closely linked to the position of the spectator:

¹² See also in the opening of the book: "Une nuit, je fus éveillée par une canonnade proche. Transportée de joie, je volai à la fenêtre" (10) "One night I was awakened by the noise of nearby shooting. Joyfully I flew to the window" (4).

¹³ "Un flocon de vapeur blanche aussi moelleux qu'un tampon d'ouate." (Bory 289)

¹⁴ "Une traînée languide de flocons globuleux suivait [l'avion allemand] à bonne distance, qui venaient éclore l'un après l'autre dans son sillage avec un 'plop' cotonneux et mou." (Gracq 129)

La tragédie et le naufrage contemplé depuis la rive ont en commun la place du spectateur, regardant à distance et à l’abri du danger. L’éloignement et le confort du témoin tendent à déréaliser le malheur, et à faire du triste tableau de l’humaine condition une fiction fascinante. (120)

Tragedy and shipwreck viewed from the shore share the characteristic of a spectator watching them at a safe distance from danger. The witness’s remote and comfortable position tends to divest tragedy of its reality and to transform the sad picture of the human condition into a fascinating fiction.¹⁵

Though not relating to World War II, these words apply very well to the novels studied here, with one difference. The spectator of a tragedy does not belong to the fictional world: according to Aristotle’s theories, fiction acts on him as a *catharsis*, thus has a therapeutic value. Instead, in novels about war, spectators are part of the story world: they experience reality as a fiction from which they seem unable to emerge. They are cut off from the action as much as from the actors of History. That is why the spectacle of the war must be analysed in political terms.

The Spectator’s Feelings: From Strangeness to Guilt

By “political”, I refer neither to any left-right division nor to the question of “commitment”. Rather, I mean that the position of the spectator in relation to the spectacle of war may be linked to a certain position toward the City (“*polis*”), that is to say, toward the French community. In this respect, in the immediate post-war years, the most widely spread image of France was that of a whole country supporting the Resistance groups and fighting (with weapons or not) against the enemy.¹⁶ In other words, those years imposed the image not only of a people involved in action, but also of a united one, while the novels I study show both passive and individualistic protagonists.¹⁷ In *Un balcon en forêt*, for example, Grange keeps away from the war as much as he does from his fellow soldiers: “Il ne participait pas – d’instinct, chaque fois qu’il le pouvait, il gardait son quant à soi et prenait du recul. (14) (“He

¹⁵ Translation by Catherine Hoffmann.

¹⁶ The historian Henry Rousso called this image a “myth”, or the “mythologie résistancialiste”, underlining its exaggerations and complacency (20).

¹⁷ On this subject, see Margaret Atack, *Literature and the French Résistance: Cultural Politics and Narrative Forms, 1940-1950*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989.

did not *participate* – instinctively, whenever possible, he kept his reserve and a certain distance”, 5). The French term “quant à soi” also applies to his two friends, Hervouët and Gourcuff, whose behaviour is similar.¹⁸ Grange particularly hates meeting on Sunday with all the officers, guardians of the “esprit de corps”,¹⁹ one of whom writes some “petits sonnets patriotiques dans l’*Écho du front*, le journal de corps que diffusait l’armée”. (43) (“He published occasional patriotic verses in *L’Echo du Front*, the corps paper circulated by the Army”, 33) Standing back from the corps, Grange embodies the feeling of separateness from the community.

So does André Bénévent throughout *La Grande Éclipse*. When he sets foot on a Normandy beach three months after the Allied landing, “il était, comme toujours, comme partout, un étranger et un témoin un peu à l’écart” (167) “He was as always, no matter where, a stranger and a witness standing slightly apart.” Ironically called a “rearguard soldier” (48), he successively occupies three positions from which war remains quite a harmless amusement. First, he is mobilised during the phoney war and joins a pioneer company of the Alpine light infantry, whose famous uniform he feels proud to wear:

Il se compara tantôt à Cyrano de Bergerac, tantôt à Aramis, et se dit que cette guerre prenait des allures chevaleresques et primesautières. [...] Comme à regret on lui enseignait le rôle de pionnier alpin, ses instructeurs sachant mieux que quiconque qu’une fois le rôle bien appris, il serait trop tard pour le jouer. (41)

He sometimes compared himself to Cyrano de Bergerac, sometimes to Aramis, and felt that this war was taking on a chivalrous and impulsive character [...] He was trained for an Alpine pioneer company, albeit reluctantly it seemed, presumably because his instructors knew better than anyone that, once he had fully learnt his part, it would be too late to play it.

War for André is but an entertaining fiction, since his models are literary ones (the heroic comedy *Cyrano de Bergerac*, by Edmond Rostand, *Les Trois Mousquetaires*, by Alexandre

¹⁸ “Tous deux plaisaient à Grange [...] par leur quant à soi” (27) “He was pleased by their discretion and reserve” (20).

¹⁹ “Il était clair que les dimanches du capitaine Varin [...] avaient quelque chose à voir avec le maintien de l’*esprit de corps*” (42). “It was evident that Captain Varin’s Sundays [...] had something to do with the maintenance of *esprit de corps*” (33).

Dumas, and the medieval literature of chivalry). These are all books André would, like other children, have read at school, and the heroic roles would never have to be played out in real life. The theatrical vocabulary suits this soldier who shoots at the enemy only once and does not even know whether he aimed accurately.

In the second part of the novel, André emigrates to the United States, where he is offered the chance to “go to school and learn his part as a future member of occupation forces”²⁰. Again he finds himself behaving as a child and playing roles. This time, André participates in war simulations set up by Stanford University, “plays the part of a lieutenant-colonel heading a battalion”, “attack[s] a fake hill and take[s] pretend prisoners”.²¹

Lastly, André is sent to London early in 1944. For once, he may be considered as playing a real role in the struggle, since he works for the intelligence service. However, his war remains a game, even a circus, as suggested by the fact that his office is not only situated in an Oxford Circus store, but in what used to be the toy department.²² As a consequence, André, who is in charge of mapping the German fortifications on the French coast, can see nothing but signs of the war devoid of any reality: “Sur cette carte au 1/50.000, vous verrez des symboles: batteries, nids de mitrailleuses, champs de mines, points d’appuis.” (159) “On this Ordnance Survey map, you’ll see symbols: batteries, machine gun nests, minefields, operational bases.” The map only shows symbols, and when André is shown photos from the front, human losses are only mentioned in passing. André tries to neutralise violence by representing it in abstract forms and by talking about the media (maps, pictures) rather than the real, even in aesthetic terms (“Nice work”, he says²³). Though really involved in the Allied air bombings, he remains a stranger to the war, which induces a feeling of guilt.

The third and last section of *La Grande Éclipse* is entitled “La victoire des autres” (“The victory of others”). André, who never fought with weapons during the war, finds himself an impostor when he lands in France in 1944: “Il avait fui comme un lâche; maintenant, il revenait en vainqueur: il y avait dans son destin une telle tricherie!” (168) “He had run away like a coward and was now returning victorious: his fate was riddled with deception!” In some ways, this individual deception is an image of the official one, embodied

²⁰ “Aller à l’école et apprendre son rôle de futur occupant” (139).

²¹ “Tout à l’heure, il jouerait le rôle d’un lieutenant-colonel à la tête d’un bataillon. Il donnerait l’assaut à une colline postiche et s’emparerait de prisonniers théoriques”. (141)

²² The reference to the toys confirms, if necessary, that “Circus” is used in both senses of the term.

²³ “Joli travail” (158).

by General de Gaulle's speech at the Hôtel de Ville of Paris on 25 August 1944, asserting that France has freed herself from the German Occupier. While there is no denying that many people in France actively participated in the Allies' victory, the discourse attributing this heroic attitude to the whole country needs demythologizing. André's fictional war may be considered as an image of a collective mystification, and symbolises the bad conscience of a country which, although included among the winners, had not behaved unambiguously.

More broadly, the diverse forms adopted by the literary representation of the spectacle of war may convey the feeling, experienced by some people, of having 'missed' the war, of not having sufficiently shared in the action and hardships common to most representations of it. In *Léon Morin, prêtre* for example, it seems that war does not strike hard enough, so that everything looks like a play: the narrator, in the first pages, mistakes the Italian occupiers in Grenoble for "traveling actors" ("comédiens routiers", 7), then compares a Resistance group's assault to a theatrical performance.²⁴ War has been replaced by its parody, an idea also expressed in *Un balcon en forêt*. Gracq twice uses the French verb "singer" (to ape): firstly when depicting the Officers' Mess on Sundays (44); secondly, when Grange, having been wounded by the Germans, orders his subordinate Gourcuff to run away and not to wait for him:

C'est un ordre, ajouta Grange, d'un ton qu'il sentit malgré lui vaguement parodique. De nouveau, le sentiment le traversa que cette guerre, jusque dans le détail, singeait quelque chose, sans qu'on pût au juste savoir quoi. (242)

That's an order, Grange added, and felt that in spite of himself his tone was vaguely burlesque. Again he had the sense that this war, in its least detail, was imitating something without being able to decide what it was. (205)

There are two questions being raised here, the answers to which differ: in the first case, the demobilised warriors of the phoney war seem to feign peaceful life, Sunday lunches and family meals, so as to forget that, sooner or later, fighting will break out. In the second case, I would suggest that Grange like his comrades cannot help copying – and above all, betraying –

²⁴ "La scène se déroulait comme une représentation théâtrale d'une mise au point très poussée, où chaque acteur aurait possédé son rôle à la perfection, mais joué sans naturel" (19) "The scene resembled a stage play, elaborately produced, in which all the actors knew their parts perfectly but failed to give a convincing performance" (13).

the heroic representational model for all French men in 1940: that of the “Poilus” of the Great War, who fought so bravely. The theme of the spectacle thus has to be considered a consequence of the gap the characters bitterly observe between the epic of World War I and the defeat of 1940, followed by a certain passivity during the Occupation.

Spectators of the war feel somewhat guilty not only towards those who were involved in action – whether it be the Resistance fighters, the Allies, or their glorious forebears –, but also towards those who were badly hurt by the conflict. It is not a coincidence that the novel which most insists on guilt, *La Grande Éclipse*, was written by a man who, in 1945, was one of the first to enter the Buchenwald extermination camp. This episode does not appear in *La Grande Éclipse*, but in an autobiography Bosquet published years later, entitled *Les Fêtes cruelles*. In the following excerpt, Bosquet asks an American officer: “— Qu’ai-je fait pour mériter ce supplice: être le témoin? — Nous avons libéré le camp; vous, vous êtes de passage. Nous sommes dans l’irréel, et vous un spectateur.” (254) ““What have I done to deserve this torture: being a witness?” ‘We have freed the camp; you are but passing through. We are in the midst of the unreal, you are a spectator.’”²⁵ The position of a spectator turns out to be that of one who simply witnessed the drama, without being hurt in person.

The same applies to *Le Temps des morts*, by Pierre Gascar. The novel, based on the author’s own experience, recounts the captivity of French prisoners of war sent to a camp on the borders with Ukraine. However, this is a peculiar form of captivity, since the prisoners, gravediggers in charge of taking care of the graveyard, do not suffer excessively. Again, the distant view plays a key role: from the graveyard, situated on the top of a knoll, the prisoners can see and hear the “death trains” carrying the Jewish populations to the extermination camps. They can also observe from the window of their huts the Jews going to the station and being hit by the German guards, but the action is set too far from the spectators to allow them to perceive it in all its brutality: “C’était des coups un peu bas, maladroits et silencieux, plus semblables à de soursous méfaits qu’à des violences.” (221); “Silent, clumsy blows, aimed low, more like stealthy misdeeds than like acts of violence.” (207) What follows in the book stresses the role of the window and will serve as a general conclusion:

²⁵ Translation by Catherine Hoffmann. As far as I know, *Les Fêtes cruelles* has never been translated into English.

On me disait: “Il y en a un qui est tombé. Les gardiens lui tapent dessus... Ça y est: il repart...” On me disait: “Tiens, regarde celle-là qui court pour rattraper le groupe!”, commentaires inlassables où passaient des accents de pitié mais qui révélaiient une sorte de détachement, car la passion consiste justement à ne pas aller jusqu’au bout de l’événement et ceux-là le parcouraient tout entier avec l’avidité triste des témoins. (221-222)

Somebody said: “One of them has fallen. The guards are hitting him... Now he’s up, he’s starting off again...” Somebody said: “Oh, look at that woman running to catch up with the group!” The untiring commentaries, despite transient notes of pity, disclosed a sort of detachment, for passionate feeling will not allow you to see things through to the end, whereas these men followed the whole business with the mournful eagerness of witnesses. (207)

Here is the viewpoint of the “witnesses” or “commentators”, not of the victims; the spectators feel detached from the events, not overwhelmed by them. Since they did not participate in the epic of World War II or did not much suffer, they came out of the war unharmed, but consumed with guilt.

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