

recherches accoutumées à la théorie critique des vingt dernières années: le travail de Mall peut être mis en rapport de façon fructueuse avec les ouvrages d'Irene E. Harvey, *Labyrinths of Exemplarity: At the Limits of Deconstruction* (2002), et de Lynda Lange, *Feminist Interpretations of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (2002), par exemple.

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Lectures du "Gil Blas" de Lesage. Ed. Jacques Wagner. Centre d'Études sur les Réformes, l'Humanisme et l'Âge Classique. Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise-Pascal, 2003. 244pp. 26E. ISBN 2-84516-214-6.

This volume, issued by the Presses Universitaires Blaise-Pascal in 2003 on the occasion of *Gil Blas's* being put on the program of the Agrégation de lettres for that year, groups twelve essays, mostly by French scholars, plus one Canadian and one Belgian. This collection is edited by Jacques Wagner, who contributed the foreword and a summation article. Wagner also published, last year, a literary analysis of Books I–VI (Paris: Armand Colin). Not to second-guess the agrégation committee, but one has to ask why only the first six books were analysed, especially considering that Lesage himself gave the *ne varietur* edition of his entire novel in 1747, the year of his death. Surely he intended the twelve books of *Gil Blas* to be read together.

The foreword opens on an overview of opinions on *Gil Blas* by scholars such as Roger Laufer, A.A. Parker, and others; Wagner concludes that calling for an "open reading" transcends literary and ideological codes, particularly those of Ludovician culture, replete, as we all know, with heroism and nobility. While I agree that Lesage's writing stands, intentionally, I am sure, at the opposite pole to classical concepts of "Sublime," I do not believe that he "abandoned" "la brillante littérature héroïque" (17): it had gone out of fashion or run out of steam long before he entered literature for the first time in 1695, with his anodyne *Lettres galantes d'Aristénète*. All one has to do is check the literary production of that period. Another point: is Lesage a Modern, as Wagner maintains? While he did not worship at the Ancients' altar (despite a solid grounding in the classics at the Jesuits' school in Vannes, more on that later), there is no serious evidence that he ever took interest in either quarrel (Boileau–Perrault: 1687–1710, La Motte–Dacier: 1713–1717), leading one to believe that he held no truck with ideology.

The second part of the foreword briefly summarizes the volume's contributions, gathering a first group in the subcategory of genre and forms.

Is *Gil Blas* an adventure novel, a picaresque one, a compendium of clever references to antiquity and biblical times, or a novel written by an author who is a playwright at heart? Wagner favours the latter interpretation (with Crispin *rival de son maître* in 1707 and Turcaret in 1709, he may have a point), and he presents a second set of essays that examine the several thematic currents that run through the work. Various arguments are made for *Gil Blas* as a novel promoting Christianity, or, conversely, hedonism or perhaps libertinism, or one advocating submission to fate, among others. Wagner concludes on a question: what is it to write, to be an author? He attempts to answer this question in his epilogue.

Pierre Brunel's essay constitutes the first section, "Ouvverture." It examines the novel's "discretion," its scriptorial alacrity eschewing wordy descriptions in favour of a taut, terse diegesis, yet relying on secondary stories to provide the reader with some respite from a narrative that Brunel implicitly considers perhaps a bit dry. Next comes a series of five essays under the collective title "Du genre aux formes." It begins with Françoise Gevrey's piece, which poses the question: is *Gil Blas* an "adventure" novel? Having examined the avatars of diegesis and the interchangeability of narrators in the work, she concludes that, rather than being an adventure novel, it is a "novel of adventures," in which the telling of stories is the story.

It is not clear why the following article, Jacques Berchtold's "Le Bestiaire de Lesage," is included in a focused volume claiming to offer to *agrégatifs* a variety of in-depth readings of *Gil Blas*'s first six books. Analysing the presence of animals and their literary significance in that novel is quite a challenge, given that none is mentioned, other than as food or as a means of transport: *Gil Blas* does not even own a dog! Aside from the episode of Count Galiano's monkey (book 7, chaps. 11–16), which could have been much better developed, and is in any case irrelevant, the author shoehorns in a host of animal references in other Lesage works (mostly from *Guzman d'Alfarache*, not really by Lesage but a translation, albeit a masterful one, of Mateo Alemán's masterpiece, eliminating the moralizing digressions), plus a number of other seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century novels.

Next, Catherine Volpilhac-Auger's essay on onomastics quotes extensively Cécile Cavillac's monumental dissertation, *L'Espagne dans la trilogie «picaresque» de Lesage* (Bordeaux: Presses universitaires de Bordeaux, 1984) to underscore Lesage's clear intention to lend exoticism (or perhaps realism?) to his tale by accumulating Spanish names and surnames throughout. It might have been a good idea to remind the reader that the author was a client of the abbé Jules-Paul de Lyonne. The latter took a serious interest in him, paying him a 600-livres pension, receiving him in his household, and allowing him to participate in the Spanish tutoring he himself was receiving. That training proved invaluable later, and is likely the main source of Lesage's vast knowledge of Spanish names and places, as was the widespread availability of Spanish works, dictionaries, and even maps in Paris at that time.

François Bessire's article on antiquity and biblical references in the first six books of *Gil Blas* is erudite, thoroughly researched, and quite informative.

Bessire's analysis reflects his awareness of Lesage's grounding in the classics (at the Vannes Jesuit school), which doubtless included classical rhetoric. He might have added that Lesage did not limit his use of antiquity to ornamental references, but that he also wove it into the structure of his narrative. Chapter 10 of book 1 presents, with books 4–7 of Apuleius's *Golden Ass*, similarities too close to be the result of mere coincidence.

Jean-Noël Pascal's essay on *Gil Blas* as a novel written by a dramatist is well documented and quite persuasive. It is also tactful enough to reject the notion that the dramatist Lesage, in writing *Gil Blas* as a novel with numerous dramatic references, topoi, and processes, had started a trend. I wonder, however, whether *Gil Blas* is really "un cahier d'esquisses et un laboratoire" (130) for future plays, given that all the plays he wrote after 1715 (seldom by himself) were Théâtre de la Foire one-act operettas (he wrote *La Tontine* in 1708, but it wasn't produced until 1732, at the Comédie-Française). Not to disparage the Foire works, which are the subject of a substantial and respected body of scholarship, but none of them has the dramatic stature that is displayed in *Crispin* (1707), and even more so in *Turcaret* (1709). On the other hand, a case for ekphrasis is not so easy to make, particularly in view of Brunel's opening essay.

The next group of essays is collectively titled "De la lucidité à la sociabilité." It begins with Alain Niderst's essay on Christianity in *Gil Blas*. There again, as in Berchtold's bestiary article, the question of relevance arises. Most of the quotations are drawn from books posterior to the I–VI sequence. While Niderst does acknowledge that, by and large, the ecclesiastical figures depicted in the novel are less than admirable (from the hero's uncle, Canon Gil Perez, to the archbishop of Grenada), he attempts nonetheless to salvage the notion of Christianity by arguing that the novel demonstrates (in a non-preachy way) that there is hope for humanity, and that virtue can endure despite bad examples. But cannot one also claim that Lesage is merely following Molière's precept, *plaire en instruisant* (which would support J.-N. Pascal's thesis on Lesage's writing)? To assert, as Niderst does, that "Gil Blas est un roman parfaitement chrétien" (140) would have required, I believe, somewhat more specific textual evidence of Christian doctrine upheld and/or practices described, in order to be persuasive.

Following Niderst's essay, Hélène Cussac inquires about *retraite* in *Gil Blas*, situating halfway between Pascal and Rousseau the author's notion of retiring from the world and the values he ascribes to that. Skilfully, with considerable research as well as keen awareness of the evolution of both spirituality and the ideas on pleasure, she demonstrates how the first six books of Lesage's novel mark an important stage in the understanding of both solitude and gregariousness. She successfully depicts Lesage not only as an advocate of truly Epicurean—simple and honest—pleasures but also as a resolute enemy of vice, whether open or masquerading as virtue (without bringing Christianity to bear on her analysis). If not necessarily in the history of ideas, her work definitely belongs in the history of mentalities.

Seduction is the subject of Marc-André Bernier's article, following Cussac's inquiry on *retraite*. He traces persuasively the evolution of the word's meaning through dictionary entries in the successive Académie française editions (1694–1798). He shows how the concept evolves from a negative denotation (to lead astray) to a more positive one (to please and charm). In practical application, he shows how Gil Blas evolves from "seduced" (he is deceived first by the parasite in the Peñaflores inn, and later by Camilla) to "seducer" (he charms the duke of Lerma by his writing style, the archbishop of Grenada by his flattery). Like Cussac, Bernier opposes Lesage to Pascal, in deeming "seduction" to be the necessary lubricant of social relations, and an essential component of "divertissement," the latter, far from being the greatest of human miseries as Blaise Pascal deems, functioning both as sign and practice of benevolent tolerance for human passions. The Bernier article is a fine piece, also worthy of a place in the history of mentalities.

The next essay, by Paul Pelckmans, represents a radical departure from the others, which concentrate on the main storyline. He chooses to examine the novel's longest and most elaborate secondary tale, *Le Mariage de vengeance*, located in chapter 4 of book 4. He correctly points out the starkly tragic contrast between that story and the context in which it stands, namely Aurore de Guzman's quest for don Luis Pacheco, the man she loves and is determined to marry. Pelckmans is a first-rate, internationally respected scholar, and he doubtless felt that it was necessary to underscore the importance of the theme by concluding his article with a secondary study of Bernard-Joseph Saurin's tragedy *Blanche et Guiscard* (1763), which deals with the same story. I am reluctant to second-guess him, but perhaps it would have been useful to relate *Le Mariage de vengeance* more explicitly and structurally to chapters 3, 5, and 6, which recount Aurore's enterprise to win and wed her beloved.

The final article, by Gérard Luciani, endeavours to create a link between Carlo Gozzi (1720–1806) and Lesage. That link is personified in Fabrice Nuñez, Gil Blas's lifelong friend (and narrative foil), and a hack author if there ever was one. The article is really about Gozzi's feud with two other Italian authors, Pietro Chiari (1712–85) and the famous playwright Carlo Goldoni (1707–93). Perhaps even more than in the Berchthold and Niderst pieces, one is entitled to raise the question of relevance. The author concludes his essay by admitting that the controversy between Gozzi and his rivals in eighteenth-century Venice did not necessarily produce any best-sellers: it is witness to the enduring fortunes of *Gil Blas*, perhaps, but numerous and better examples of the book's and the character's fame abound.

Jacques Wagner's "Épilogue" section has as its title "Écrire: d'une esthétique de la langue à une moralité de la littérature." Clearly an attempt to establish a taxonomy of *Gil Blas*, the essay is subdivided into categories: "Savoirs," "Auteurs," "Lecteurs," "Parole," "Écriture," "Nouveau Roman," "Styles," and "Engagement," the last serving as a general conclusion. Those categories are in turn subdivided into subcategories, and further into sub-subcategories. Wagner's systematic approach is perhaps the most illuminating piece of the entire volume, as he uncovers Lesage's authorial enterprise, which is, as he

had announced in the foreword, a wilful departure from classicism, and at the same time an ironic rejection of all the topoi examined in the first five categories mentioned above. That will probably suffice for the first-time *Gil Blas* reader, but the seasoned scholar will recognize that, even at this early stage of his novelistic career, Lesage already had formed opinions on the general worthiness of literature as a profession, opinions that he would continue to express even at an advanced age (see, *inter alia*, letters 26 and 31 of *La Valise trouvée* [1740]).

The volume is of generally good quality, although the illustrations (from *Gil Blas* and *Guzman d'Alfarache*) leave something to be desired. I cannot tell from which editions they were taken, as there is no table of illustrations, and the only two antique editions of *Gil Blas* that I own date respectively from 1763 and Year III of the Republic, while my *Guzman* dates from 1787. The pictures are rather muddy and lack definition, which means they might have been printed from photocopies; they neither aid the text nor please the eye. The text itself, however, is clean, with relatively few typographical errors, and the binding is serviceable, although pages 73–74 occur twice.

Whether this collection of essays succeeds in its self-appointed task of “rendre à l’*Histoire de Gil Blas de Santillane* toute sa saveur et amorcer une reconsidération de son auteur,” as the back cover claims, remains, in this reader’s view, open to question. First, it strikes me as odd to embark on such a rehabilitative endeavour on the strength of only half the novel (even if several authors simply disregarded that limitation). Second, two major points remain largely unaddressed, much less resolved. What place, if any, does *Gil Blas* occupy both in the corpus of picaresque literature, and in post-classicism? Merely to say that Lesage distances himself from the aesthetic categories of classicism is not enough. Regarding the other issue, several authors mention picaresque *en passant*, as if everyone knows exactly what it is, and as if a single archetype of picaro and picaresque narrative exists. No serious attempt has been made to examine and discuss the work done on the question by contemporary French and other scholars, such as René Démoris (*Le Roman à la première personne*), Didier Souiller (*Le Picaresque*), Claudio Guillén (“Toward a Definition of Picaresque,” in *Literature as System*), Richard Bjornson (*The Picaresque Hero in European Fiction*), Alexander Blackburn (*The Myth of the Picaro*), Cécile Cavillac (supra), or my own study (*Lesage et le picaresque*). *Gil Blas* is not necessarily only a picaresque novel, but the clearly picaresque narrative slant is too overarching to be taken for granted. Still, this volume can offer rewards, and Lesage researchers should read it. The bibliography is substantial, and, as I said above, the closing Wagner essay is useful and interesting in its synthetic/taxonomic approach to authoriality.

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